

THE BRIDE OF OEDIPUS

by

ALIBABA GOODWIN

Author of 'Mystery of the River' and 'Templon
and the Towers of Neema'

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PREFACE

I will not say whether this story is fictitious or based on truth. I will say this though; it was told to me by an evacuated legionaire, who during the ding-dong battles of the Libyan desert was by some strange chance evacuated to one of the base hospitals of India, with gun-shot wounds in his thigh. A handsome powerfully formed specimen, he claimed Polish descent, though his English was faultless. My first impression of the man was that he was very reserved, as well as one of the neatest, cleanest living and best disciplined soldiers that I have had the good fortune to meet.

To start with, I did all the speaking, mainly in the form of questions, for who would not wish for first hand information about the French Foreign Legion; the army of forgotten men, men whose valour has become a byword, and whose fighting qualities are admired by all. However, to get back to the point, he thawed by degrees until after a month of constant meetings, he, one warm afternoon, told me this strange story. When I asked him if it was true, he said, "Does that matter at all? It certainly held your interest while I told it," and with an enigmatic smile, he walked away. Ten days later he left India.

I set the story down as he narrated it to me. To be true to my readers, I will say this. In the ensuing story I have raised Bob Merino to be champion of the East, which he never attained in story as it was told to me. I have, of course, twisted the names of the people and places, just in case this strange story did have its basis on truth!

Another thing, the different views on and opinions about that mysterious after life that we

can only guess at, are not my own. I have merely tried to portray the opinions of those who deny what others affirm.

I have written the story as short as possible, though I could have stretched it over at least twice the number of pages. My reason is this—too much padding in a story of this type becomes monotonous, and the majority of readers who merely want a pleasant afternoon's reading, just skip pages and paras that contain mere description. They are interested in incident and in conversation.

Now go ahead and plunge into the story. Whether you fall in love with Helen and sympathise with Bob, or criticise their morals and views will make no difference provided you read the book through. That is the test of a good story.

A. G.

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I

THE SPARK

The evening stars twinkled faintly, and a lifeless breeze fanned the Indian countryside sluggishly. The distant hillocks appeared a strange unearthly colour, and the winding unmetalled road looked like a ribbon of dirty grey thrown carelessly on a great dark green quilt.

Helen Hudson leaned her back against the bonnet of the little car and gazed at the twinkling stars. The deep tenor of a man's voice startled her out of her reverie.

"Hullo! Having car trouble?" the voice enquired.

"My word, you startled me! Yes, the dashed thing just won't go. Do you know anything about cars: I mean could you fix the thing up?"

"Fortunately for you I am an experienced mechanic. Have you a torch?"

"Yes, in the pocket of the door."

The girls moved away and stood silently, while the man opened the bonnet of the little automobile.

For a short while the young man fumbled about. "Got any emery-paper? O. K. Don't bother, I've found some. The points of the plugs are highly carbonised. I'll have the thing done in a minute!"

Helen did not reply. Her thoughts were elsewhere. Finally, the man straightened up from his tedious task. He jammed the bonnet down and snapped the clamps on. Next he lighted a cigarette and looked at the still figure of the girl. She seemed

to be absorbed in thought. He took a deep pull and inhaled it slowly. Then he spoke.

"Look Miss I don't suppose it's any of my business, but don't you think it's unsafe for a young girl like you to drive out here all alone, and at this hour?"

Helen answered slowly, "How do you know I didn't come here quite early, and then have the engine stop?"

The man gave a little laugh.

"In that case the engine would not be hot!"

"Well, if you must know, I did come here late, so what?"

"So nothing," replied the man, "I guess it's no concern of mine. I'm always putting my foot into trouble!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't intend to be rude, but I'm feeling so awful, that I just got nasty over nothing. I think you are quite right. It's not safe for me to be out here all alone."

Having spoken thus the girl turned and looked away.

Impelled by a strange curiosity, the man voiced his next question.

"What are you thinking about?"

His question came so suddenly, simply and naturally, that the girl could not help but answer truthfully.

"I am just wondering if there is such a being as God," she replied in a low voice.

"You don't have to wonder," replied the man in amazement, "there is a God. Most certainly there is!"

"You are very certain about it. Have you seen Him?"

"No Miss, I haven't, but you don't need to see Him to know He exists. Look at the stars: their beauty, and...."

"I know I was looking at them. They are beautiful. So is everything else: I mean the sun, the hills, the trees, and all that, but what has all that to do with God?"

"Good gracious! Who else but He could have created such perfection."

The girl laughed cynically.

"This promises to be interesting," she said softly, "well, before you go any further, answer me one question: Is God the very essence of perfection?"

"Decidedly yes!"

"Very well, why has He created a world so sinful, lustful, diseased, and so vicious?"

"I don't suppose it was that way to start with: man made it that way!"

"Ha, ha! I see. God made something good, and man turned it rotten; now who made man?"

"God of course!"

"Well, there you are! Can imperfection result from perfection?"

For a moment the man was non-plussed. Suddenly, he spoke. "God gave every man his free will, so that he does everything of his own volition."

"You amaze me! What about the millions who are born and bred in sin. What about the millions who have to earn their living by sinning? What about the millions who are born insane, deaf, dumb, blind or crippled? Have they any time or

reason to bother about trying to better their chances of salvation?"

"Each will be judged according to his circumstances and environment!"

"I see. So that's your belief?"

"Yes, that's the way I look at things."

"I feel sorry for you in that case; because you are either without a sense of proportion, or else you just choose not to see another's point of view!"

"How do you figure that out?"

"Look, if God is just, why should He inflict such heavy punishment on the entire world, for the sin of our first parents. Would you if you were a king or a power of any sort, have the murderer as well as his innocent child hung? No, I guess not. Well, that is exactly what God is doing. Wherein comes His justice?"

"That is scarcely a point for us to argue on!"

The girl laughed. "You mean you cannot argue upon a point of that kind, because it does not admit argument of any sort. Wait a bit, don't interrupt me. You also believe that God knows everything, past, present and future?"

The man nodded.

"In that case," she went on, "He knew even before our births whether we were for salvation or damnation, misery or happiness, good or evil. Why then does He create people to live cheap coarse lives, to corrupt and taint others and to be ultimately damned for ever? Where comes this great love for mankind that he is supposed to possess?"

"Look, I am no theologian, so I guess I cannot answer you all that. In fact, I belong to that vast fraternity of sinners, but I know and feel that there

is a God. I can't help it. Doesn't every fibre of your being cry out to you that you will have to answer for all your sins to One Who is far greater than yourself?"

"If there is anything beyond the grave, and if I am brought before the judgment seat, I shouldn't let it worry me unduly. If you roll a child in the gutter, can you blame it for getting soiled?" Any way let's not argue any more about it. I suppose your life has been happy and so you believe there are good things in the next. Mine hasn't so I don't even believe there is another existence. If there is a God, and He could have created such a wicked world, I haven't high hopes for any other world He may have created!"

"Very well Miss...?"

"Hudson. You may call me Helen."

"And my name is Jack Wells: Call me Jack."

"O. K. Jack."

The man took a last drag at his cigarette butt and tossed it away.

"Well your car is O. K. Will you be going away?"

"Yes. Can I give you a lift?"

"If it wouldn't be going out of your way. You see I set out this morning on foot, and I enjoyed the hike. I decided to sleep at the Dak Bungalow, and return home the next day—that's tomorrow—but now since you offer me a lift, I'm delighted to accept it. You know I think you are most fearfully interesting!"

Helen smiled in the dark.

"Have you anything lying in the Dak Bungalow, that you would like to pick up?" she asked.

"No. Everything is in my haversack. Shall I drive?"

"Do. Please."

Jack Wells slid in behind the wheel, and soon they were gliding along the narrow road.

"Cigarette?" he asked pulling his case out of his pocket with his left hand.

"Thanks, but I don't smoke."

The man took a cigarette out of the case, and after lighting it with a petrol lighter, he drove in silence for a while. This girl was a perfect enigma. She intrigued and puzzled him. He glanced sidewise at her and spoke.

"Look Helen, you have something on your mind. I would advise you to tell some one all about it. It would make you feel a lot easier."

"Do you think so?" asked the girl in a very low voice.

"Yes, get your best friend and whisper all your troubles in her ear. You'll feel worlds better!"

"But I haven't got a friend!" came the pathetic reply.

The man was on the point of asking her to consider him as a friend, but something restrained him. He had made her acquaintance only a few minutes ago. It would perhaps be considered presumption on his part if he ventured to voice his thoughts. Moodily he swung the car around a corner, and jammed his foot on the accelerator, as he saw a long stretch of straight level road gleaming dull white in the subdued light of the rising moon. For a while they remained silent. At last Helen spoke, "I don't quite know why, but I feel I can trust you, and I feel I've known you for years: So

"I'll tell you what's making me feel so bitter—that, of course, is if you are interested in hearing all I have to say."

"Hell! Yes. Go ahead and get it off your chest. You'll feel worlds better after you've done it!" replied Jack in an encouraging tone.

"Well it's like this: I'm going to be married tomorrow morning."

"Well?"

"I hate the fellow: I positively detest him!"

"Don't marry him in that case."

"I wish I could do it that easily, but I can't. I've been promised to him, and I've given my word also!"

The man controlled a deep growl in his throat. Somehow the idea of arranged matches appalled and repulsed him. He thought of the countless wrecked lives and human derelicts that resulted from such a heinous practice. True there were countless love matches that ended in disaster; but then it's always better to launch yourself into the speculative happiness of matrimonial union with a partner of your own choice, rather than let some interfering fools smile with satisfaction after foisting a life mate on you, who may not only be totally unsuitable, but who may not have a single thing in common with you, and whose very presence perhaps may ultimately prove detestable! Jack drew at his cigarette and spoke, "My only advice is do not do it. Do not wreck your entire life to satisfy the whims of another!" The girl fell silent. In the distance the lights of Kariapur appeared with startling suddenness, as they swung around a rocky outcrop, and once

more rolled along a narrow straight expanse of dusty road.

The girl's mood, and her thoughts seemed to infect the man, who silently manipulated the wheel, his body slightly hunched, and his eyes on the distant lights. The little automobile steadily cut the distance down, until at last it rolled luxuriously over the smooth surface of the tarmac road that formed the main artery of the large network of roads in the comparatively large town of Kariapur. The man spoke suddenly. "Look, how about making the 'Majestic' for a spot of coffee?" he glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist watch and continued, "it's only* eight o'clock now. You could sit in comfort, and tell me everything about yourself! Feel like it?"

Helen considered for a moment, and then answered, "Very well."

The man steered the car with adroitness through the crowded streets, and in a short while they slid to a standstill before the 'Cafe Majestic.'

The soft strains of 'Blue Danube' issued from the radio. The hum and bustle of the streets seemed far away. Helen stared at thin streams of vapour that rose from her coffee. She raised her eyes and for the first time looked at her newly made friend and confidant. He was an Anglo-Indian just out of his teens. He was remarkably handsome: with a firm almost cruel set about his mouth and chin. His short sleeved khaki shirt displayed a strong muscular neck, broad well set shoulders and forearms of powerful sinewy muscles. His eyes were dark brown and his hair black. His skin was a rich olive tint, except where the sun had bronzed it to a nut brown colour.

Jack Wells in turn gazed at the girl before him. She was remarkably beautiful, with a certain softness about the fine regularity of her features; that made her almost madonna-like. Her hair gleamed like dull red gold in the subdued lights, and the shadow of her long silken lashes made it impossible to tell whether her eyes were deep blue or violet. Jack mentally decided that she could not be more than seventeen. Her complexion was flawless and her lithe figure was rounded with a subtle allure. Jack felt a mad desire to ask Helen her age, and the colour of her eyes, surge suddenly through him. He got a firm grip on his unruly fancies and with a hand that was rock steady, he lifted his cup and took a sip. "Good stuff this!" he told her, with an infectious grin that suddenly robbed the hardness from his mouth, "now Helen, how about giving me the low down on everything. I may be able to give you a spot of good advice, or I may even be in a position to help: you never know. A heavy punch sometimes does much more than a heap of arguments!"

"It won't do much good here. It's like this: If I don't marry this fellow, my father will be in a very serious position. He holds a cheque that my father forged, and he would not hesitate to expose dad. In fact that's the only reason why I have consented to marry him. My dad's an old man, and it would be just too much if he were exposed and imprisoned: It would finish him, and leave me branded as the daughter of a forger!" Her voice trailed off with a sharp note of bitterness. Jack took a few thoughtful drags at his cigarette and spoke, "What's his name?"

"Tom Croxley," replied Helen.

Jack's mouth assumed that cruel set once more, while the fingers of his left hand beat a devil's tattoo on the ornamental marble topped table. He felt a strange unaccountable desire to squash the life out of this Tom Croxley. He wondered what he looked like. Helen saw the dangerous set of his mouth and smiled a little. "No Jack, there's no other way out of this mess. I guess I've got to go through it with a smile, or else let the old boy down. Any way you were right. I feel a lot easier now that I've told you. Shall we beat it from here? I think I could do with an early night in bed; considering the ordeal I've got to face tomorrow!"

"Well come along," said the man slowly, "I guess it's jolly rough on you, having to go through with it all!" he shrugged, as he tipped the waiter and followed the girl out of the place.

"Drive yourself home first, and I'll get along on my own from there," said Helen as she seated herself and pulled the door shut. A short while later Jack brought the car to a standstill outside an unpretentious homely little cottage. He fumbled with the door of the car, and got it open. "I stop here," he said still holding the top of the open door, "where do you hang out?" Helen gave a mirthless laugh. "I stop at eighteen Napier Road, but from tomorrow I will be Misses Croxley, twelve Mount Road!"

"Well Cheerio, and forgive my boldness, but I never asked you your age. May I know it?"

"I am not yet sixteen," smiled Helen, "rather young to be forced into matrimony, don't you think so?"

The man flicked his cigarette butt far out across the road with a skill born of long practice, and then stretched his hand out. "Well it's been good finding you out on the scrubland. It's been a pleasure to enjoy your company and your generosity!" The girl took the strong fingers in hers. For the brief second that they held each other's hands, an electric thrill seemed to shoot through Helen. Though she did not realize it at the moment, she had fallen in love with this man, and on the eve of her marriage to the man she hated! She felt the blood suffuse her face, and she was glad of the darkness. "Good-bye Jack!" she said in a half-choked voice, as she manipulated the gears and swept away into the darkness.

Jack Wells stood in the shadows for a while watching the faint glow of his discarded cigarette butt. He was wondering why the world was so full of unscrupulous scoundrels, and why they had to be in Kariapur above all places. He shrugged his shoulders and moved across the dimly lit compound to the cottage. He was still wondering if Helen's eyes were deep blue or violet!

He opened the lock on the trellised door and switched the lights on as he moved through the rooms. In the hall he slipped his arms through the straps of his rugsack, and dropping into an arm-chair he stretched his body out in luxurious ease. Cupping his hands to his mouth he yelled, "Bearer!" Then he proceeded to undo one of his dusty boots.....

While Jack sipped his tea and looked through the news, Helen sat alone in her room with her brows furrowed. She had tried to eat without success. Even the strong cup of tea which she was

so fond of, had a wickedly distasteful tang about it when associated with thoughts of Tom Croxley. Wherever she looked, whatever she did, she could see a mocking mental picture of Tom, handsome evil and sneering, his eyes gleaming with the light of conquest.

Seated before the tall oblong mirror of her dressing-table, the girl regarded her reflection in a semi-detached way. Her eyes rested on the dull red hair, on the wide brows, thin arching eyebrows, her violet eyes with their long lashes. Then her gaze went to the flawlessness of her nose, and the alluring perfection of her sweet lips and firm chin. As she sat there lost in thought, the image would slowly merge into dimness beneath her prolonged stare, and appear strange and grotesque, taking on the appearance of a photographic negative. Then it would stand out with startling clarity, only to merge into dimness again.

Suddenly a hot heavy pair of hands dropped on her shoulders. She started as she saw their reflection in the mirror. With a gasp she turned round. She was looking into the handsome, sneering face of Tom Croxley. Her countenance was flushed with indignation. She shook herself free of his grasp, and faced him with icy anger in her eyes. Croxley placed his hands on the hips of his exquisitely tailored lounge suit and laughed low.

"Well, well. Is that the attitude? I'm not worried. It will change tomorrow. I like them tough and spirited. It's a wonderful pastime breaking them in!"

"You loathsome creature!" The girl almost whispered, with an icy inflexion in her voice, "Can't

you leave me to enjoy the few hours of freedom I have, or does it please you to inflict yourself on me even tonight?"

"It's scarcely proper for the daughter of a forger to speak in that tone!" sneered Croxley, his thin lips twitching slightly. At this Helen wilted as though she had been struck.

A different light appeared in Croxley's shifty blue eyes. He stared at the lovely creature before him. He now regarded her as his own. Before Helen realized what his intention was, he strode swiftly up to her, and swept her into his arms. He dropped one hand on her full rounded bosom; while his lips mashed down on hers. With a gasp, and a scream that was almost like a wounded animal's, the girl tore herself from his loathsome embrace with such force that she went sprawling against the wall. She snatched up a long curved Afghan knife that ornamented the tiny writing table, and served as a paper knife. Outraged modesty and fierce hatred sent twin fires flashing from her eyes. There was deadly purpose in them. A strange thrill of anger not unmingled with fear surged through the cowardly heart of the man.

Helen spoke, "Now get out from here. My father has allowed you, or rather you've assumed *carte blanche* of this house. You haven't the same power over my person; at least not till tomorrow. Get out from here you beast or I'll stab you without the slightest hesitation!" With a wicked scowl on his pale face, Croxley slowly left the room. Helen could hear his heavy tread as he walked down the garden path. She found herself trembling violently from the reaction of the incident. The knife left

her fingers and struck the table: point first. It remained there quivering ominously; almost symbolic of the gathering storm that was about to shatter all her happiness, or rather anything that could be termed as such in her pitiful existence! For some unaccountable reason she felt insecure. She felt eyes on her. She shut and bolted all the doors and drew the window blinds. Then she tore her clothes off in frantic haste. She stood there quite naked, even the ribbon that held her hair had come undone and tumbled to the carpeted floor while she undressed. She would go in and have a bath. She felt polluted now that Croxley had touched her. She gazed at herself in the mirror. She could see the slightly red marks on her ivory flesh where the fiend's lustful fingers had pinched her. She opened the door of the bathroom and switched the light on. The icy sharpness of the spray revitalised her body and steadied her to a remarkable extent.

Croxley seemed like an evil fancy of a nightmare, that evaporates on waking. She rubbed her body down vigorously with a large towel. She felt her skin tingle with new life. She felt clean. Suddenly she realized that Croxley was a coward. The fear was plainly visible on his face when she had stood on the other side of the writing table and threatened to stab him.

For some unaccountable reason she felt happy. She actually surprised herself singing as she slipped into a clean dress and moved into one of the adjoining rooms. She could hear the deep heavy breathing of a man sleeping. She pressed the switch by the doorway, and flooded the room with light. Her father lay fast asleep, fully dressed and sprawled

crazily across the bed. The fumes of liquor hung heavily on the air that was fogged with tobacco smoke. Slowly she moved across the room and bent over the drunken man. She removed his collar and tie, and after a struggle managed to get his coat off. Next Helen removed his shoes and socks, and pulled the quilt over his body. Switching the light off she left the room. She realized why her father was drunk. The subject of the forged cheque and her forced union with Croxley were things that played havoc with his conscience.

She went into the dining-room. She gazed with distaste at the plates that had not been uncovered or touched. She switched the light off and stepping through the front door, she breathed in the luxuriant air of the cool February night. She found herself wondering what Jack was doing. Perhaps he was stretched out on an arm-chair, smoking and reading. She wondered if he was thinking of her. She gazed at the distant clock tower. It was eleven o'clock. Tomorrow by this time!.....She shuddered at the thought. Croxley's wife, his plaything, his slave, his woman.....She would have to submit to his caresses! Thoughts of self-destruction flooded her mind. No, that would accomplish nothing. First she must get the forged cheque into her hands and then she could leave the monster and defy him.

She found herself going over the strange conversation that she had earlier in the night with Jack. Perhaps there was a God. She looked up at the star spangled sky. She thought of her early life: she had been orphaned at birth by the death of her mother and had practically run wild ever since.

Those were glorious days. Days when her father was a god, who could never do wrong, and then the sneering face and naked looks of Croxley had made her realize that she was no longer a child.

She gazed up at the stars again and spoke in a low whisper, "God, if You really exist and are there, as everyone says, and if You created me, why do You allow a thing like Tom Croxley to damage my life? If You remove him from my life, I will believe You do exist, and that You are really good!"

....The night air started growing slightly nippy and Helen moved slowly back towards the open door of the hall.

A few minutes later she was lying in bed vainly trying to sleep. Her tortured fancy kept up a continual stream of worrying thoughts: while mental pictures of Jack: handsome and strong, and Tom pale and sneering, swam before her.....

II

FREEDOM?

Helen opened her eyes drowsily and stared at the golden sunlight that streamed in through the open window. At last the morning had arrived, that would see her wedded to Croxley. Rising from her bed, she washed and dressed leisurely.

It seemed almost like a dream as she stood by Croxley's side, and he slipped the ring over her finger and bent down and kissed her. How she went through that farce without breaking down or fainting, is a thing that Helen could never understand. She and Croxley left the church in a shower of confetti and entered the waiting car. Slowly the car rolled down the long drive and gathered speed. Helen crouched back in the corner, like a trapped creature. At last it had come. At last she was Misses Croxley. Croxley watched her out of the side of his eye. He was fairly gloating. He did not see the traffic signal, or the large lorry loaded with cotton bales tearing down on him. Too late he swung the wheel around in a frantic effort to escape. There was a screech of tearing metal as the crash occurred. Helen was flung violently against the door. The back of her head made sharp contact with the metal work and she slumped down on the seat unconscious.

* * *

Helen opened her eyes and gazed vacantly around before she recalled what had happened. A nurse was bending over her. With a laugh she flung the covering aside and sat up.

"Don't worry nurse," she smiled, "I'm not dying! I guess I was only knocked out!" She raised her hand and felt her head. There was a large bump on it, that was painful. "What happened to my Dad, and to Mister Croxley?" she asked quietly.

The nurse hesitated, and then said, "You might as well know now. They are both in a very serious condition. You will not be able to see them just yet."

"Could you let me have all my husband's possessions, and clothes? I'll go back in a taxi. Could you please send one of the ward boys to fetch one?"

In a few minutes the nurse returned with a doctor, and a bundle wrapped in newspaper.

The doctor gave her a look over, and felt the bump on her head. "No pains elsewhere, or any knocks or bangs?" he asked, "no doctor, I am alright. I was only knocked out. I will drop in to find out how my father and Mister Croxley are doing; or if I am unable to come, I'll phone." Impatiently Helen sat through that ride. At last the taxi stopped outside her house with a grinding of brakes. Paying the man, she grasped the paper covered bundle and hurried in. Eagerly she opened the bundle. It contained a pair of patent leather shoes, a torn and blood-stained dress suit and a shirt front speckled with blood. Eagerly Helen went through the pockets. She drew out an envelope from the inner pocket. It contained a thick bundle of notes. Her groping fingers found something else—the forged cheque. She dashed into her father's room and snatched up a box of matches.

She lit one and held the flame to the damning evidence. She watched in grim satisfaction as it turned to a little curl of thin black ash. She ground it to nothingness with her shoe. She laughed aloud. She seemed to be walking on air! The telephone in the hall rang suddenly. She moved into the hall and picked up the receiver.

"Hallo, this is eighteen Napier Road.... Yes, this is Misses Croxley who just left the hospital.... That's alright, I'm fit enough to take the worst news, go ahead.... My father?..... When did he expire?.... Yes, I'll come across." Helen replaced the receiver and stood there thinking.

So her father had died as a result of that accident. She wondered why she did not scream and faint, as she had seen people do so often in films. She wondered if the phone would ring again, to convey to her the intelligence that her husband was dead. She found herself wishing Croxley would die of his injuries and leave her free. She heard a car drive up. The door bell rang. Helen opened the door, and found herself looking into the eyes of her mother-in-law. Misses Croxley senior had a kind face, soft eyes, and a figure that just verged on the matronly. She took one look at her newly acquired daughter-in-law and said in a soft voice, "So you've heard."

"Yes," came the toneless reply.

The elderly lady explained why she had come. She wanted to take Helen to her new home. Helen was aware of the fact that her mother-in-law knew nothing of the nefarious methods employed by her son to acquire his wife; also she realized that refusal to go to her new home would fan idle gossip into

flaming scandalous conjecture; so she went with Tom's mother.....At her new home, Helen withdrew into a shell of thoughtful reserve. She scarcely ate anything at lunch and only answered when her mother-in-law spoke. That evening she attended the funeral of her father. She was silent, pale and dry-eyed. The mumbled condolences and sympathising words of well-meaning acquaintances and friends fell on her ears unheeded. Her thoughts were far away; her mind could form only one picture—that of a handsome manly sun-tanned face that smiled at her.

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In the comfort of his cushioned armchair, Jack Wells glanced through the papers. Suddenly his eyes rested on a little headline, "Newly weds meet with accident. An accident occurred on Main Street, Kariapur, yesterday when a newly married couple were driving away from the church. The bride was uninjured, but the bridegroom—Mr. Croxley is in a critical condition in the Victoria Hospital. The bride's father Mr. Hudson died in hospital, as a result of his injuries."

Jack found thoughts of Helen rush into his mind with overwhelming intensity. He recalled that starlit evening out on the scrubby wastes north of Kariapur, where she stood still and silent beside the broken down automobile, her eyes on the astral beauty of the heavens. He remembered his conversation with her in the curtained alcove of the cafe. He wondered if he should go across and see her. After all it was the natural thing to do. He sat there for a while, gazing meditatively at the

spiral of blue smoke that rose from the steadily burning stub in the brass ash tray, and then he glanced at the clock on the wall. Eight o'clock. Jack was of the kind that are slow in arriving at a decision, but who never waver after having decided. He did not go across to the small garage at the rear of the compound. He decided that a walk would be better. His easy swinging stride soon brought him to eighteen Napier Road. The house was in darkness. Suddenly he realized that Helen would be at her new home—twelve Mount Road. About ten minutes of quick walking brought Jack to the heavily shadowed road, where the deep shadows cast by the avenue of tamarind trees made it impossible for the distantly spaced road lights to cast their radiance anywhere, except on the gravel road immediately under them. The next moment he was moving silently through the garden towards the distant porch. He stopped suddenly as a figure approached him. It was Helen. He recognised her immediately.

“Helen!”

“Jack!”

He took her by the hands. “I’m terribly sorry: I read about it in the papers only about an hour ago. I went immediately to Napier Road, but there wasn’t anyone there: so I came here as soon as I could! What are you doing out here all alone?”

“My mother-in-law has gone down to the hospital as Tom is being operated on tonight. I can’t stand the idea of going there and pretending to worry about a man I hate, so I said I was feeling rather sick and remained home.”

He released her hands and she turned away. "What, looking at the stars again?" he asked in a low voice, that sent the blood coursing faster through her veins.

"Yes, I was thinking that perhaps you are right. Perhaps, there is a God, and he caused the accident to save me from Tom!"

As she spoke, a car rolled up to the gates, the beams from its head lights cutting sharply into the heavy darkness of the tamarind trees. "Quick, get away down this path, and jump over the wall. That's Misses Croxley and half a dozen of the town's worst gossips returning from the hospital. If they see you here they will say I've started flirting with strange men, because my husband's in hospital and my dad is dead....Quick beat it!" Jack understood the girl's attitude, and hastened to obey. Soundlessly he vanished across the lawn, and reached the moss covered wall just as the car swung up the drive to come to a stop in the shelter of the porch. He vaulted on to the wall and glanced back. People were alighting from the car. He turned and looked down the road: no one was in sight. Lithely he leaped off the wall and walked slowly down the road. He found himself wishing that Croxley died of his injuries. He checked his thoughts. He left the shadowiness of Mount Road, and soon found himself in the glare of Main Street. He stopped at the 'Metro' picture house, and lighting a cigarette he stared thoughtfully at the crowd leaving. The first house was just over. After gazing at the photographs displayed on the wall of the verandah, Jack decided that it would be a pleasant change to see a picture. He could not remember how long

ago it was when he had last seen one. He moved across to the ticket office, blowing out a cloud of smoke as he went.

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Uneventfully the days passed for poor Helen. The prudery and narrow-mindedness of her sister-in-law Ethel, made her attitude of silent reserve change to one of icy resentment. Her mother-in-law was slightly absent-minded and always considerate. On more than one occasion Helen refused to go to the hospital to see her injured husband. She never bothered to give any reason. She felt secretly glad when she heard that the accident might leave Tom crippled for life. She lived under no sort of restraint: coming and going as and when she wished. Once Ethel told her in no uncertain terms that she was not fit to be the wife of her brother. Thereupon Helen slapped her on the face. Her mother-in-law interfered and it ended in a fierce quarrel. Before the day was out Helen had packed her clothes and slung the full valise into her little car. Her face was pale, and her eyes blazed with anger as she pressed her foot on the self-starter.

Ethel was standing in the doorway. "That's right you slut," she was shouting, "get out from here. You are not fit for a decent man. I am sure Tom will be happy without you!" Helen did not reply. She put the car into gear and swept out of Ethel's life. A few minutes later she was back in her own home. It seemed strangely cold and distant. She gave a half-frightened laugh as she turned the key in the lock, and undid the bolt. She moved through the rooms. Everything was as she had left it the day her father had died. The smell

of stale tobacco smoke, and liquor still seemed to lurk in the stagnant air. The place almost seemed to smell of death. She gazed at the blood-stained dress suit of Croxley, where it lay dust covered on the cushioned seat of a cane chair. She felt stifled. She wanted to rush out into the fresh clean air. With an effort she fought down her feelings and flung open the doors and windows. She looked out of the dining-room window. In the verandah of the outhouse she could see the old bearer sunning himself while he enjoyed the fumes that he inhaled from his age old hookah.

Good old Abdul! He had been in her father's service ever since Helen could remember. When she was only a toddler he used to buy her tops, kites grotesque wood dolls with hideous faces and large eyes, and Indian sweetmeats. How expectantly she used to wait for him to return from the market every morning. How eagerly she used to twine her little legs about his muscular brown calf, and struggle to get her plump hands into his pocket, where the coveted sweetmeats lay.

Abdul's hair had started greying at the temples but he was still upright, and active, and the aquiline sharpness of his face still shone with vigour and strength. As she gazed at Abdul, Helen found herself pitying him. As time sped on, he would grow old, and bent. Too feeble to enjoy life: yet forced to live a faltering bleary eyed toothless existence through those greying years—the evening of his existence. How handsome upright and virile life is when it starts. How awful to contemplate the end of the race! She knew that

Abdul was merely fatalistic. His belief lay in Kismet : or that which the immortal has ordained !

Helen found herself vaguely wondering if there was such a thing as God, or if he were merely an invention of the priestly class from time immemorial, in order to enforce laws—religious and social—on the multitude and thereby benefit themselves and live their lives of hypocrisy and broken vows under veil of secrecy, and mystery, that always surrounded them. She smiled to herself as she recalled her childish conception of God who with a flowing beard and half-closed eyes, sat high in the clouds. She had often wondered why he was pictured with his eyes closed. Perhaps, she thought, he felt sleepy having to watch the wicked actions of all the sinners in the world, all day and night ! Even God must have a break ! She felt strangely amused as she recalled her childish fancies ; a whole chain of which had been suddenly awoken on her seeing Abdul. Abdul took a last satisfying pull at the stem of his hookah and rose from the tiny foot-stool he had been squatting on. He blew out a stream of greyish smoke and turned around. He saw Helen leaning out of the window. “Salaam Missy baba !” he cried in pleasant surprise, moving towards her, “when Missybaba return ?”

“Salaam Abdul. I came back only a few minutes ago. Look Abdul, get the chokra to sweep the place out and dust everything. I am going to stay here.”

Abdul said nothing at this bit of intelligence. He knew his young mistress was having matrimonial trouble of some sort.

“Helen Missy like some tea ?” he asked as he flung open the door of the kitchen.

"Yes Abdul," she said, and she watched him rinse the blackened kettle out. She turned away and wandered out into the small maidan and gazed at the vigorous skirmish in progress between two school boys for the possession of an old football stuffed with rags....She would not go back to Croxley's house. She was quite determined about that. She could quite easily live on the money that her elder brother sent home every month. Her attention was once more drawn to the two combatants, as one of them howled his delight, and dashed away with the coveted prize tucked securely under his arm; while the other sobbed and yelled in the bitterness of defeat, hot tears trickling down his grubby little cheeks. She felt a strong desire to grab the triumphant urchin, and slap his cheeky face, but he was too far away. She heard Abdul call out to her. She retraced her steps to the house. The dining-room had been brushed and cleaned with amazing speed. Everything was neat and in order. Helen sat at the table, and poured herself a cup of tea. Good old Abdul! The man was a perfect jewel. After she finished the tea, Helen felt wonderful. She supervised the cleaning and tidying of the house. She realized she would have to go to the bank to draw out some money. A few minutes later she was driving down to the bank. With the cheque cashed, and the crisp notes in her bag, a new sense of independence swept through Helen. At last she was mistress of herself. Suddenly, she remembered Jack Wells. A strange warmth flooded her as she thought of him. Mechanically she swung around the little island at the centre of the cross roads, and drove towards his house....She stopped

at the end of the drive and approached the house with a half-shy feeling. She stopped and stared at the strange notice on the front door—"DON'T STAND ON CEREMONY! JUST BARGE IN!" It's eccentricity helped to dispel any backwardness she still felt.

"Jack!" she called out, pushing the door slightly open, "are you at home?"

"Sure thing! Sit down and make yourself comfortable. I will be there in a minute."

Obediently Helen pushed the door open and looked around. The verandah was simply furnished with a few cane chairs. She sat down on one of these. Scarcely a minute elapsed, when Jack Wells stepped through the doorway in shirt sleeves and flannels.

"Well I'll be blowed! I thought it was Elsa come across for another book!" he smiled.

"I just had to come over," she said, "I've had an awful row and left Croxley's house. I don't mean to ever go back!"

"Mother-in-law?"

"No, sister-in-law."

"I see. Look, what happened? Tell us all about it, I may be able to advise you."

"Well, you know it's like this, Ethel Croxley hated me always, and was always under the impression that I trapped her precious brother Tom in some way or the other. During my stay at her place, she made herself objectionable whenever she could: especially when she found out that I never bothered to visit him in hospital. Things came to a climax this afternoon. She abused me, and told me I was not fit to be Tom's wife. I slapped her

as hard as I could, and left the house. I guess there's not anything more to tell. I drove back home—by the way the dashed car is misfiring again, you'll give it a look, won't you? Please—Then I got Abdul to clean and tidy the whole place, went down to the bank for some money, and drove here on my way back!"

Jack regarded her thoughtfully for a few moments, and then he spoke, "After all you've been through, I think you need some real relaxation. I've got nothing to do. If you feel like it we will go for a spin. I tell you what. Come along to the Fun Fair with me. You are bound to enjoy yourself. What d'you say?"

"O. K. Jack, I'll come, but please fix the car. Otherwise we will have to walk."

That evening was one of the happiest in Helen's life, as she strolled through the crowded fair with her arm linked in Jack's. Jack seemed to be most versatile. He won one prize at the shooting gallery, and two at the dart boards. He loaded her with all the prizes, and they wandered through the crowded grounds like two happy school children. The stars were twinkling and the moon shone in all her glory as they returned from the Fair. Helen found herself wondering why all men were not so lovable, handsome and dependable as Jack. The car rolled straight up the drive. "Care to come in for a spot of coffee?" he asked as he switched the engine off. "Yes Jack," Helen answered as she followed him into the house.

She watched interestedly as he turned the electric heater on, and filled the kettle with water.

Suddenly she broke the silence. "Jack where do you work? You seem to be always at home!"

The man gave a short laugh. "That's because I am on leave. I'm in the excise!"

"Oh!" she exclaimed and then fell silent as she watched him pouring out the coffee. Jack was silent too. Helen finished the coffee and looked up to find Jack's intent gaze on her. She rose to her feet. "Off eh?" asked Jack as he rose from his chair too. He accompanied her into the verandah, which was lighted by moon beams that filtered in through the trellis-work. "I hope you enjoyed yourself really well!" he added as he dropped his cigarette butt on the floor, and stamped it out. Helen caught his hands impulsively. "Oh Jack, I've never had such a grand time anywhere. Thank you!" and she put her arms around his neck and kissed him. Her action broke down all barriers between them. Jack suddenly realized he loved this beautiful red-haired atheist with all his soul. The next moment she was in his arms. He tasted the soft dinging fragrance of her lips. Her response was perfect. He could see her eyes large and smudged. She clung to him like a limpet. She could feel him fumbling with the buttons of her blouse.... She could feel his caressing hands fondle her flesh.... "Jack, my darling. My darling!" she sobbed, as the fearful intensity of their love swept through her leaping heart, and overpowered her so strongly that she trembled in his grasp. The man picked her up in his arms, and moved into the room they had just left. There was the click of an electric switch, and the place was plunged into darkness..... Abdul waited in vain for his mistress

to return and taste the well-cooked supper he had prepared. Poor Helen had at last found the delectable nectar of love, and was tasting it with the reckless abandon of a girl who had been love-starved since infancy!

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The morning sun peeped through the windows. Helen opened her eyes, and gazed cautiously around. Jack was by her side fast asleep. He was quite naked. She was naked too. She slid softly off the bed. Her clothes were tossed on the chest of drawers. Silently she dressed. She combed her hair and secured it with her ribbon, which lay on the bed. Softly she tiptoed out of the room. She climbed into the car and released the brake. It rolled silently down the long drive. She put it into gear and drove home.

During the days that followed, Helen lived in the dreamland of unfettered, untrammelled love. Her days were golden, and her nights were breath takingly amorous : spent under the tropical brilliance of the honey-coloured moon. Tom Croxley seemed an evil figment of a fast dissipating dream ; as also seemed the sudden demise of her father. Out on the moonlit scrubland, she lay in the arms of her demi-god, and plotted and 'planned a future of unalloyed bliss and pleasure ; little dreaming of the gathering storm clouds that were beyond her rose-coloured horizon ! The lovers fondly imagined that Croxley would sue for a divorce, when he found how things were going.

Meanwhile gossip and scandal had gone their rounds, through the clubs, institutes and bungalows

of Kariapur, and their evil whispers were not slow in reaching the ears of Tom Croxley as he lay in his clean white bunk in hospital.

The injured man gritted his teeth and made a fight for life and health....He must live....He must have his revenge. He would recover....He must. Dark hate and a lust for revenge were the two things that roused the sick man, and made him fight for a new lease of life, and health; with ever fibre of his battered body! His return to health and life was speedy and phenomenal!

Medical men and surgeons raised their eyebrows in surprise and disbelief, when the man whom they had mentally consigned to the pitiful existence of a cripple, rose and walked without the aid of any one! They never knew of the burning flaming desires that had injected new life and vigour into the battered frame and forced it to rise. From then on his recovery was amazingly rapid. A little more than four months after his wedding, Tom Croxley left the hospital without even a limp in his walk. Beneath the suave smiling placidity of his handsome face, there blazed the fires of venom and murderous animosity. Tom smiled as he listened to his sister Ethel's vituperative narrative of Helen's wicked and sinful life with the tall Anglo-Indian excise officer....Later that evening, in the seclusion of his room, Tom cleaned and loaded his father's old revolver.

III

"VENGEANCE IS MINE"

Helen lay curled up on her bed, reading. She was clad in a pale silken kimona. Her thick red hair was undone and formed a startling contrast with the dull blue of the quilt. She wriggled her bare legs impatiently. Jack should be here any moment. He must have returned from his tour of inspection. She heard a footstep in the other room. Ah, it was her Jack at last: handsome, tall and smiling. The door opened and she looked up with joy in her eyes, and then her heart froze as she looked into the pale face of Tom Croxley and saw murderous fires in his blue eyes.

"Didn't expect me, did you?" he asked sardonically. The girl did not answer but crouched back in fear. "I've heard a lot about you, but I've come to find the truth out for myself," he ground out in a low voice, as with one movement of his strong hands he ripped the thin silken covering from her, and gazed at her exposed body. He saw the sweeping curve of her neck, and upright firmness of her ivory breasts: pink tipped with beauty, but his cruel gaze rested on her belly. No longer had it the flatness of girlhood. The gentle swell plainly told of another little heart that beat beneath Helen's.

Vice like fingers bit into Croxley's shoulder and swung him around as though he were a babe. He gazed into the blazing eyes of Jack Wells. "You despicable dog!"....growled the young man, as he drove his fist into Tom's mouth. The blow sent Croxley to his knees. Jack crouched for a spring...There was murder in the other's eyes. A flash

of blue metal in the evening dusk a sharp stab of flame and a thunderous report. Jack tried to stand. He could hear Helen scream. He could see Croxley and then he felt himself floating through blackness. His legs gave way under him, and he fell on the carpet in a limp heap. Helen dropped back on the bed in a paroxysm of icy terror. There was the flash of a brown-skinned figure leaping through the door, another report and the sharp cracking of a bone, as Abdul's sinewy arms bent back the hand of the murderer. The automatic clattered to the floor and Croxley sank down unconscious beneath the relentless pressure of a wrestling stranglehold. Then blackness enveloped Helen.....Abdul's experienced eye took in everything at a glance. Reverently he covered the nakedness of his young mistress with the quilt, and switching on the light in the hall he snatched up the telephone with his lean brown fingers.

The days that followed were a hideous nightmare to the poor girl. Croxley was in prison, awaiting his trial for murder. The earthly remains of Jack Wells had been laid to rest in the little graveyard, that bordered the convent of the 'Little Sisters of the Poor.' The peaceful quiet that always marks such an event was entirely hypocritical: a scandalous undercurrent of slander and meanness marring the quiet of the atmosphere, and helping to pile contempt on the young shoulders of Helen Croxley. After everyone had left, Helen still continued to kneel by the grave. Her hot salt tears fell on the dry clods that were heaped up in a rough mound. Now and then her eyes lifted wearily from the grave to fasten on the soft majesty of the Virgin, whose

beautifully wrought sculpture was visible in a crude grotto of black rock that overlooked the little graveyard.

Mother Margaret of the 'Little Sisters of the Poor' walked through the silent graveyard, slowly rolling the beads of her rosary between the balls of her forefinger and thumb. She moved towards the new grave, her intention being to say a prayer for the soul of Jack Wells. Suddenly she noticed the kneeling figure with drooping shoulders and bent head. It was pathetic to see the convulsive sobs shake that slight figure and the tears gleam like pearls for an infinitesimal second, in the rich gold of the evening sun before they tumbled on the loose soil of the grave, to be sucked up immediately by the dry earth.

The holy woman's heart went out to the sobbing girl. She placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "My child," she said softly, "he has gone to a happier land!" Helen looked up and started backwards. For a moment she thought the Virgin from the grotto had descended! Then she realized her error. As she gazed with tear blurred eyes at the noble serenity of the nun's pale countenance, something snapped in the red-headed beauty, and she sprang upright, her slight body quivering with emotion. "I don't believe you! I don't believe you!" she shrilled, "my heaven was in his arms. His heaven was my heart. I have his child here, in my body. She made a passionate gesture and went on"—If he still exists in any way, how can you say he is in a better land. How can you say he is happy when his heart beats here with mine. How can you believe in a God who is constantly flinging people into the

arms of misfortune, evil circumstance, and sorrow: Who is constantly severing the thread of life of the innocent, and Who allows the malicious and the evil to prosper. You're horrible like the rest of them if you trust in Him! Oh I hate you. I hate you. Go away from here and worship and praise your cruel God elsewhere! and sobbing like a wounded animal, Helen turned and tried to fly from the presence of the white-robed woman, but the emotional strain she had undergone proved too much for her delicate state, and she collapsed across the mound of tear-watered earth in a dead faint. The nun raised her voice and shouted to two other nuns who were walking within the cloisters. Obediently they came. They gazed in silence at the still figure on the lonely grave. "Help me with her," said their superior shortly, "be careful with her, she is in a delicate state." . . .

Helen opened her eyes to find the familiar face of the nun she had met in the graveyard, looking anxiously at her.

"My child, how are you feeling?"

Helen replied that she was feeling weak. Mother Margaret raised the girl's head a little, and held a tiny wine cup to her lips.

"Sip this, you'll feel better."

Helen took the contents of the glass at a gulp, and coughed as the raw spirits scorched her throat. She lay back, and a warm flush swept through her. "Thank you!" she whispered, looking gratefully at the other, "I am sorry for what I said to you." The nun smiled, and patted her gently on the arm. "Would you care to tell me all about it?" she asked, "you'll feel better, perhaps, if you do."

Helen rose from the cushioned couch and stood up. "Let's go outside, it's stifling in here!"

The nun accompanied her out. Silently they walked past the dusky cloisters into the large garden. The fresh cool air was as a balm to Helen's tortured nerves.

Mother Margaret indicated a garden bench. Helen seated herself and gazed silently at the distant flush of purple, that marked the flight of daylight.

The holy woman sat down beside her and held her hand reassuringly. A great sense of calm and peace swept through Helen. The heavy perfume of the citron scented garden swam around her. It had a strange freshness about it, that made her feel strong and vital. The low droning of a beetle, as it flew towards the dimly illuminated chapel, blended with the soft noises of the night. The rhythmic tinkle of the falling drops of water that slowly dripped off the leaking garden tap into the shallow pond seemed to mark the fleeting seconds with a regularity that was almost clocklike. In the distance a few candles burned steadily in the shelter of the rock grotto, lighting up the marble figure of the Virgin, and giving the statue an almost ethereal appearance. In a low voice Helen told Mother Margaret the whole of her sad story. She told it with a childlike truthfulness and simplicity that left no room for doubt. At the finish she broke down, and burying her face in the kind nun's lap she sobbed bitterly. Tears misted Mother Margaret's eyes as she softly stroked the beautiful red hair. The distant chapel bells rang out the 'Angelus.' Like God's own benediction the soft sounds fell on the hushed air, carrying their message

of peace and beautiful promise to the ears of the sobbing girl. The gentle beauty of their tenor seemed to tell her that beyond the storm clouds of her life lay a calm of golden glory where tiredness, and pain, misery and heart breaks, sorrow and longing, could never exist. She ceased sobbing and raised her head to look into the face of the nun. Suddenly she knew in her little heart that this holy woman had caught a glimpse of that golden land....In a low voice she spoke, "Please let me stay here, I want to be good, I want to learn to pray like you. I want to believe in God. Oh please keep me here with you. I don't want to go back. I have nothing to go back to..I don't want to see another man. Don't refuse mePlease!"

Gently Mother Margaret stroked her head. "Very well, you may stay here," she said calmly, "and now you will have to eat something. We eat very simple fare, you will have to get used to it here!"

Helen twined her arms lovingly around the nun. "You are so kind and sweet. I fell terribly wicked and guilty when I look at you. May I kiss you. Please?"

Mother Margaret bent down and received a kiss from the girl's lips. She was glad of the darkness, for her own eyes were swimming with tears! With the red-haired neophyte clinging to her she moved away towards the living quarters of the nunnery.....

Croxley's trial was indeed one of the strangest that ever took place in Kariapur. Far from denying or attempting to evade the accusation he openly admitted that he had shot Jack Wells and pleaded

guilty. However, he would give no reason for his action, nor did he once mention the name of his wife. Judge Whiteside—who was intimately connected with Tom Croxley's father during his lifetime—tried the case. Croxley was sentenced to life imprisonment. A month later, he was landed on the lonely convict islands that lie far out in the heart of the Indian Ocean. Croxley was soon a thing of the past; Even Helen was forgotten! Scandal-mongers always want fresh green pastures to soil with their vile droppings!

Meanwhile in the heavenly calm of the convent, Helen's starved heart reached out eagerly for the alluring peace that is offered to the sinner who repents and does penance. Never was a convert more sincere, or ardent in her belief and worship than the former atheist.

It was on a cold morning, early in October, when the suspicion of approaching winter lurked around the grey walled cloisters, that Helen brought another life into the world. The girl mother's heart sobbed with joy as she caressed and kissed the squalling bundle of wriggling pinkness. At last she could see the silver lining to the darkest cloud of her life. She looked with surprise, joy and awe at the baby. It had the strangest and most surprising birthmark: a livid mark shaped like a heart, high up on its chubby right thigh!

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In the clear sunshine, stripped to the waist, Tom Croxley laboured with a pick. By his side another convict laboured also. The shrilling of a whistle reached Tom's ears and with a last mighty

heave he buried the point of his pick in the soft soil, and straightened up. He wiped the beads of sweat from his brow with the index finger of his right hand and flicked them into the newly excavated trench, and then he gazed at the wide expanse of dark green water before him. His companion gazed at him for a while, a mirthless smile twitching his lips, and then he spoke. "Not a chance," he said hoarsely, "even if it were possible for you to swim all those hundreds of miles, you wouldn't get a chance. The sharks would get you the moment you entered the water!"

Croxley continued to look at the deep rolling water. He made no comment. The other looked at him. "Would you like to get away mate?" he asked quietly.

Croxley smiled expressionlessly. "You just said there was not a chance! Why ask me such a question? I think it is foolish to ask!"

The other regarded him intently. He hitched his soiled trousers up a bit and spat thoughtfully into the trench: finally he spoke. "What did they get you for?" he asked shortly.

Croxley looked him straight in the eyes. "It makes little difference if you know. Murder!"

"You croaked a guy eh?"

"Yes, I shot him dead for taking my wife from me. Did you kill some one too?"

"Hell, no! I forged a cheque, and stole some dough. I also assaulted an officer and hurt him very seriously. Bloody good job he didn't die!"

"How long have you been here?"

"Almost a year. Listen I think I can trust you. There is a way of getting out of here. I am going to

try it any way. Two could manage better than one. Like to come?"

Fierce hope blazed in Croxley's eyes. Better to attempt escape and perhaps succeed, than be damned to remain in the cruel isolation of that island of living death!

"What are your plans?" he asked laconically.

"Listen carefully," replied his fellow convict, "I've been here for sometime. The northern point of the island is heavily wooded. Some months ago I found a large hollow tree trunk, lying close to the beach. My behaviour over here was exemplary and the warders trusted me more than any of the other fellows. I used to be allowed out with an axe and a machete to chop down firewood: well, the trunk gave me ideas. I hollowed it out beautifully, working a little everyday, until now it's perfect. I've actually given it the shape of a boat. It will do perfectly. I should know: haven't been a sailor for nothing, neither have I forgotten what I learnt as a boy in the ship building yards of Newcastle! During the last month I actually fitted a rudder of iron wood to the blasted thing. It can comfortably take two men in a sea that is not too rough! A few days before you came I dragged it close to the beach and hid it in the thickest and thorniest vegetation we can easily provision the thing. I've already smuggled a cask of fresh water and a large tin of biscuit into the woods. The weather is calm. I am going to make a break for it this very night: Coming?"

"Coming? Why ask me such a fool question, of course I'll come. I'm in with you on this up to the hilt!" replied Croxley, the muscles of his face twitching with excitement.

"Get a grip on yourself, and don't start singing!" growled the other, "no one must suspect."

The whistle blew again.....Croxley and his partner Peter Lucas swung their picks once more. The murderer's heart bounded with excitement. Freedom....Freedom....Freedom! The pick seemed to say as it thudded softly into the earth. Not only freedom but revenge. Helen's baby must have been born by now! Her child by that dog. Jack Wells. Croxley gritted his teeth and swung his pick with devilish force.

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The night was black: a devil's mantle flung over an island of the dammed. A cold breeze stirred the leaves of tall palm trees to an eerie rustle. Croxley lay on his belly, his chin propped on his clenched fists, waiting. Something hit him lightly on the shoulder and fell on the floor of tight-packed earth—a little ball of soft wet clay! He rose to his feet quickly. Silent as a phantom, swift as a gliding snake he was out of the low mud walled hut. A hand gripped his wrist. He found himself led away through the thick blackness. At times walking, at times crawling on their bellies; in order to elude the night sentries, the fugitives at last stood in the shelter of the woods. "Take this" whispered Lucas. Croxley could feel the handle of the machete that the other offered him. He gripped it hard. Silently they sped through the woods. Close by the beach his companion stopped him. "Careful now," he whispered, "or you will get the thorns in your fingers." Slowly and carefully the thorn bushes that covered the crude dug-out were removed.

"Now pull steadily. It's a slope: it will come quite easily. O. K. pull!" said Lucas in a low tone. Slowly the boat left its shelter and at last stood on the beach, with the tiny wavelets licking it. One more trip they made back for the cask of water and tin of biscuit. "Ready?" asked Lucas.

"Ready," replied Tom Croxley with a wicked grin. He whirled up the short stick he was holding, and crashed it down on his companion's head. Lucas collapsed without a sound. Swiftly Croxley worked. He tore off the unconscious man's shirt, and metal disc with his name and number, and changed them with his own. Then he picked up the limp form, and carried it back towards the woods. Stopping beside a large nest of termites, he dropped his burden and drove the point of the machete savagely through the heart of his erstwhile partner and helper!

Hastening back to the beach he wrapped his convict clothing in a bundle and tossed it into the dug-out. He then commenced the arduous task of dragging the boat out to sea. Unassisted by the mighty thews of his murdered companion, it was no joke, but desperation gave Croxley the strength, and at last the boat rocked slightly in the swirling waters. He ran back, and snatched up the long pole and crude paddle that lay on the beach. Returning he clambered into the dug-out and standing in it, he heaved mightily with the pole. Slowly the boat moved out to deeper water and floated right out to sea. Discarding the pole, Croxley manipulated the paddle, and sent the little coracle further and further from the shore with each silent powerful sweep of the crude wooden contraption. Freedom....Revenge

.....Freedom.....Revenge! When the morning sun rose, Croxley could only see billowing green water all around. Picking up his bundle of convict's clothes he tossed them overboard. The identification disc of number 213 convict Peter Lucas followed them, making a glittering arc before disappearing into the emerald waters, and taking with it the secret of Croxley's second crime into the keeping of the deep maw of the ocean! The escaping man rowed on straight towards the rising sun....

Late that afternoon searchers found the remains of the dead Croxley—so they thought—unrecognisable after the ravages of the termites. His identification disc still dangled from an ant-eaten wrist. The authorities wondered where Peter Lucas Number 213 had mysteriously got to. They wondered why he stabbed a fellow convict. They wondered, and they wondered! Had the fellow gone crazy and swum out into the shark infested waters after murdering Croxley? Most mysterious! The police would be notified as well as all ships; but it would take some time. Meanwhile Croxley with each powerful sweep sent his coracle closer and closer to the Tenasserim Coast!

Within the grey walls of the convent, Helen spent her time helping the holy woman. With the birth of her child, a new world of joy spread out before the girl. The days passed beautifully, with the soft voice of Mother Margaret as music to her ears, and the citron-scented nights spent in the garden with her little baby in her arms. Helen sometimes wondered if a serpent could ever enter this fragrant, peaceful Eden. Would her paradise lost?.....?

It was only a tiny paragraph in the papers, but it created quite a stir in Kariapur and set tongues wagging! Helen gazed at it.

Mysterious incident on Penal Settlement.

On the 10th of October a convict disappeared mysteriously from the Convict Island of Bakutu. He is Number 213 Peter Lucas *alias* Sam Bradys—serving a life sentence for forgery, Bank robbery and attempted murder. Number 315 Thomas Croxley a fellow convict was found dead the following morning stabbed with a machete. The entire affair is shrouded in mystery. As yet no trace of Lucas has been found....

Helen laid the paper down, and continued to knit. Through the window she could see Jack fast asleep in his pram, under the shade of the citron trees.

Tom Croxley, the last link between her and the bitterness of the past, was dead. It all seemed like a wildly fantastic dream to Helen. So rapid was the succession of events in that drama, that Helen who had now stopped knitting, and lay back in her chair with her eyes shut, almost imagined she was at home, in her father's easy-chair, wasting the golden hours of her girlhood in day dreams! Little Jack's cry made her open her eyes. With a soft smile on her face she rose and walked through the doorway, out into the garden to where the tiny mite lay in its pram....

IV

A SERPENT IN EDEN

Croxley eagerly scanned the horizon. Was he imagining things or was there really a thin dark strip on the very edge of the green? Gripping the crude paddle with work toughened hands he rowed with renewed vigour. A short while later his heart bounded with excitement. It was most definitely land! Picking up the rusted machete from the bottom of the coracle, he hacked a small notch on the rim of the dug-out. He kept count of the days in this manner. He counted them. Twenty-eight notches altogether. He had escaped from Bakutu on the tenth night of October. It must be seventh of November. His eyes were sunken, and his body starved. By strict rationing he had managed to make the water last. The biscuits had ended the previous morning. The waves aided the lone man's efforts, and he soon drifted close to the shore. He gazed at the wild forested Tenasserim Coast. With a final sweep of his paddle, he drove the cockle shell of wood into a tiny inlet, and climbed out. For a while he stared around thoughtfully, and then he returned to where the coracle rocked gently in the deep narrow inlet. Laying hold of it he pushed forward. Deeper and deeper into creek he progressed, until at last the sides of the boat crunched into the soft walls of the inlet. After removing the machete from the bottom he proceeded to roll rocks stones and mud into the boat. In less than an hour he had succeeded in completely closing the end of the creek and covering the little coracle with rough jagged stones and sand. Picking up the

machete he left the beach, and stepped into the fringing forest.

It was not the first time that Croxley found himself in a forest: Only there was a difference. This time he was without firearms of any kind, also he was on unfamiliar ground. He made a strange figure as he stood there, in tattered trousers, with a thick growth of hair on his face and head; his torso developed to stringy hardness with rough work, and the rusty machete gripped in his brown hand. All that day Croxley pushed through the forest. He ate fruit that he recognised as non-poisonous, and quenched his thirst at the river: the course of which he had been following since he started.

It was shortly after sunset that he came upon signs of human habitation. He peered interestedly at the small tent, before which sat a white man, holding a sauce pan over a little fire. The appetising aroma of the sizzling bacon made him twitch his nostrils eagerly. A little distance away from the man, tethered to a stout stake were three ponies. Croxley could see the man's rifle leaning up against an iron wood.

Without a sound the fugitive drew back, and with extreme caution he started working his way around the tiny clearing. Finally, after what seemed hours to him, Croxley reached the coveted position. He gripped his machete firmly and watched. Evidently the bacon was ready, for the man placed a can of water over the fire. After doing this he drew back a bit and sitting on the grass, he rolled himself a cigarette. The rich fragrant smoke reached the nostrils of Croxley. His eyes blazed

with strange fires. Noiselessly he approached the unsuspecting man. Step by step he came nearer. The machete was poised on high, one step more, and then the heavy blade of the machete swept down. The sharp steel crunched through the skull of the other. For a moment he remained sitting, and then slumped sidewise on to the grass. A few minutes later Croxley reached the river side with his burden. He removed all the clothing of the murdered man, and rolled him into the river. He saw the body—a smudged blur float away with the current. He picked up the clothing and straightened up. Quickly he returned. The water in the canister was boiling. It did not take the rummaging fingers of the murderer long to find the sugar and coffee. After a long while Croxley sat down to a really satisfying meal. He washed it down with sweet black coffee. Next he rolled a cigarette and smoked. It was his first cigarette after months. Never had tobacco tested so sweet to Croxley. It sent his senses reeling, and wafted him into a new found paradise. He stretched his limbs in luxury and blew out a thin stream of bluish smoke. Long after nightfall he retired to sleep within the little tent, washed, and clad in the clothes of the man whom he had so foully murdered.

Croxley rose early the next morning. In a short while he had a fire going and he cooked himself a meal from the plentiful supply of rations in the tent. After a smoke he sent about examining the dead man's effects. It soon became evident that the fellow was a prospector. Croxley found a considerable sum of money in neatly folded notes, and a diary with a few letters as well as a map.

Without any hesitation he opened the diary and read the neatly inscribed name 'John Hamilton.' Swiftly his eyes perused the entries that were made in the neat calligraphy of the late owner. The last entry interested him, it was 'Nov. 7th. The map tells me I am about fifteen miles from Mergui. I suppose I will make Mergui early tomorrow evening. Struck some surface copper five miles back. Poor quality not worth troubling about, as it is in very small quantity.'

Croxley was satisfied. He replaced the diary in his inner pocket and rolled another cigarette. After he finished his second smoke he set about loading the ponies. It scarcely took much time to drop and roll the tent and fasten it on top of one of the animals. Jamming the worn felt hat on his head, he gathered the reins of the leading animal, and started off northwards. With a cigarette between his lips, and his beard and the hair on his head in a thick shock, none of his acquaintances had they seen him, would have recognised Tom Croxley as he sat the pony and pushed steadily on towards Mergui. Late that afternoon Croxley reached his destination....

A week later, a missionary clad in sober well fitting clothes and wearing a thick bushy beard boarded a steamer at Rangoon, and stood with his Bible in his hand, as the boat steamed away towards the shores of India. He smiled benevolently at passengers over his horn-rimmed spectacles.... None who saw him suspected the savage murderous fires that burnt beneath the neatly cut coat of the ecclesiastic....

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The evening sun painted the cloisters with a dull purple light. The cold grey of a November evening had already descended on the quiet country side. The raucous screeching and clatter of myriads of birds echoed through the air, as they settled on their wonted perches for the night. Slowly the screeching died down. Slowly the purple of evening changed to the insipid dusk of approaching night. The kneeling figure rose from the side of the grave. Helen had no eyes for the glories of nature. Her thoughts were far away. With a preoccupied look on her face, she approached the hooded pram which stood close to the grave. She gazed at the sleeping infant. Her face softened. Catching the handle of the pram, she wheeled it slowly and carefully out of the cemetery. A few minutes later she was in the garden of the convent. Oblivious of the malicious pair of eyes that watched her every movement she wheeled the little pram to its usual place by a bower of roses, and leaving it there, she walked away to the chapel to make her evening devotions.

When she returned a few minutes later, the pram was empty. Perhaps one of the nuns had lifted the little baby out of the pram, and carried it indoors. Without any suspicion of the evil that had befallen her, the girl went indoors. The first one to meet her was a young nun-sister Theresa. Her reply was in the negative. Helen was slightly anxious. In a short while her perturbation was changed to wild feverish anxiety. Her little Jack was carried away. No one could furnish her with any information. An icy hand clutched at the girl's heart strings. Only a few minutes ago she had

rocked the infant to sleep. A wild search of the entire convent and the surrounding grounds was made, but to no effect. Helen Croxley's child had disappeared into thin air. Wild eyed and haggard the girl mother crouched in the tiny chapel, her eyes on the statue of the Virgin with the Child in her arms. Silently she prayed for the restoration of her son.

At midnight Mother Margaret peeped into the chapel, but did not disturb the silent figure. Through the cold hours of the night, Helen kept her lonely vigil, praying for her baby to be returned. The candles flickered low and her tired eyelids drooped. Slowly she slid down on the thick carpet before the altar of the Virgin Mary, into the sleep of exhaustion.

In her dream world she was still kneeling before the statue, praying with all her heart.

"Virgin Mother of God," she entreated with her hands joined, "Give me back my little Jack. Oh please, please. Have I not suffered enough already?"

To her surprise the statue smiled with infinite tenderness, and replied in a voice of silvery melody, "Helen my child, this is a part of the trials that God your Father in Heaven allows the evil influences on earth to impose on his chosen children. Be patient!"

"But my child: What shall I do without him?"

"Helen, my son was not only taken from me, but crucified before my eyes! He was reviled by all, spat on and mocked, while he died between two thieves on calvary to expiate the sins

of all humanity. Be patient Helen, and your reward will be great!"

Helen awoke with a start. She had actually fallen asleep before the Virgin's altar. She rose to her feet and with a tired sigh left the chapel....

All through the day she remembered that dream. It gave her greater strength. Instead of breaking away, or abandoning her new faith, she clung to it all the more tenaciously... Kariapur was combed by the police, but all to no effect. Helen Croxley's baby could not be found.

V

THE RUNAWAY

The warm morning sunshine flooded the large grounds of the orphanage. Groups of children were all around. They ranged from little ones that could be scarcely toddle about on their plump little legs to grown ups of thirteen and fourteen years of age. Standing apart from all the others was young Bobby. Extremely handsome and well set, he was large for a child of his years. It was plain to tell that good blood had gone towards his make up. How he came to be in that orphanage was shrouded in mystery. Savage as a little Red Indian and strong far beyond the average boy of thirteen, he was constantly in trouble. As he now lounged against the dusty bole of a shady neem tree, his one thought was to grow so big and strong that he would be able to break the neck of the male attendant, Mister Berkeley, who seemed to delight in making his life so miserable. Whenever Bobby quarrelled with any of the other boys, irrespective of their age or size it would end in severe chastisement of the cruellest type for him at the hands of the bearded bespectacled Berkeley. The sturdy young back of the boy bore numerous marks of the lashes that were a part of his daily existence.

Yes, one day he would be a man, with great rolling muscles on his body like the sailors and stokers whom he had seen so often swaggering down the road, towards the low quarter of the town, while their boat waited in harbour. Yes, he would possess whang-leather muscles and steely fingers. That would be a great day; the day when his fingers would dig into the tyrant's heavy fleshy neck with

such terrible force that the shifty eyes would water and stand out in their sockets, while his tongue would loll out and turn a purplish black like the tongue of the puppy that he had seen die in the back yard of the orphanage! Bobby remembered how the foolish animal had upset a heavy wood framework that had fallen down, pinning it by the neck and compressing its wind pipe to such an extent that it could not breathe. He remembered how he had rushed out of the study to save it. Alone and unaided, his sturdy body shifted that great weight from the animal's neck while the other boys watched in surprise. However, he was too late. The little pup was dead when he bent down over it. He remembered the lashing that Berkeley gave him for leaving the study to help the dying animal. The gross injustice of it all was wormwood to him. But all the thrashings, he had had, instead of changing him to a cringing broken wreck of a child, had exactly the opposite effect. He was transformed from a normal youngster to a fierce little catamount, ever ready to engage in a fight, no matter how small the provocation. Latterly the older boys had learnt to their cost that he was certainly the best fighter among them and never set on him alone. Often Bob faced as many as three or four of them and even then gave a good account of himself.

As he stood alone, his eyes rested on the thick low hanging branch of the neem. That was the secret of his strength! After dark, or when no one was near to see, he would pull himself up countless times, and then heaving his bulk over the branch, he would press himself upright, or twist around the branch and perform wierd contortions. These

strange practices he would indulge in till quite tired out. At other times he would walk around on his hands. This he had seen a roadside acrobat do, and hearing that it helped to develop great strength, he had practised constantly in spite of numerous tumbles, until at last he was an expert hand balancer, and could walk right around the extensive grounds of the orphanage.

Strange to say the child's morals were a class of their own. Bob hated lying or cheating, except where the tyrant Berkeley was concerned; there he had no scruples. The most flagrant lies would roll out smoothly when he faced the cruel attendant, also he would never hesitate for an instant to cheat the man if ever he were sent out on a small shopping errand. Whenever these rare occasions did occur, Bob felt almost well disposed to his arch-enemy. His natural cleverness and promptitude made even the evil natured Berkeley realize that he was the best of the older boys to send on any job requiring reliability. Consequently, Bob to the great envy of his fellows saw much more of the town than they! But he was no fool. Never would he show himself anxious to go on any errand. In fact many were the times he had tried to escape the responsibility. Berkeley thinking it was stubbornness on his part, would cuff him into acquiescence, and then the cunning boy would set off, with gait that bespoke ill-natured unwillingness, until he was out of sight of the orphanage; then a whoop of wild glee would burst from his lips, and he would pelt away! After making his purchases he would carry out minute calculations in his mind: calculations that would leave the average boy fuddled. The result would be

a few annas would leave the loose change and be transferred to the isolation of another pocket. After this he would race away to the rear entrance of the local billiard saloon, which also boasted a bar. Here he would watch an ill-assorted aggregation of men play skittles and drink alcohol in an atmosphere hazy, with cigarette smoke and profane with 'language'! It was here that Bob first met Snappy Solomon an old Jew who was a prize fighter in his younger days. The old man had tried to turn the overgrown youth out of that den of vice, as he called the place. Instead of meeting with grudging obedience when he laid hold of the boy, the old man was surprised by a savage blow on the chin that rocked even his punch-drunk senses! That marked the beginning of a friendship between the old pugilist and the young orphan. It also marked the beginning of a new phase in young Bob's life. Many were the occasions when the old man's nature was sufficiently mellowed, by wine, and he condescended to take Bob to his ramshackle dwelling and teach him whatever he knew of boxing. These lessons, and the few rounds he managed to put in at the old punch bag, stood him in good stead when he was set on by other boys, and Bob was not slow in realizing the tremendous power of the punch he possessed in either hand!

Another place that the young fellow loved to visit was the book-stall. Here after close scrutiny and careful selection, he would spend the money he had cheated Berkeley of, on a cheap adventure magazine for boys. After carefully folding it, he would conceal it within his shirt, and draw his belt tighter by a notch or two to prevent it from falling

out. High up in the boughs of the neem tree, in a deep hollow between the branches, Bob kept his tiny supply of magazines concealed. Safe in the towering foliage, where the most daring of the other fellows dared not venture he would climb and read whenever a chance offered itself to him.

As his thoughts ran in this channel, an overripe tomato sailed through the air and smashed on the side of his face. Bob hastily wiped the remains from his face with his shirt sleeve, and with anger and resentment in his eyes he whirled around. The children all about laughed derisively. The boy's eyes gleamed as they focussed on a group of youths standing innocently by. His quick eyes had already seen a faint red stain on the hands of one of the fellows. With a savage smile he walked across to the culprit. His strong fingers closed on the other's arm and whirled him around. The other's fist described an arc. It was a powerful swing but never connected. Bob moved his head an inch and then struck. His iron knuckles crashed into the offender's face, and sent him reeling among his fellows.

That blow seemed to be signal for a concerted attack. Three of the fallen boys comrades rushed at Bob. His fists lashed out and one more went down before the other two closed with him. They were quite well built and strong, but they did not have an easy time of it. Time and again they were sent back reeling from heavy body blows. They got in blows as well, but they seemed to be up against a veritable fury. The author of the quarrel had by now sufficiently recovered to join them and they finally closed with Bob. There was a wild tangle of twisting rolling bodies. The other children gathered around

and watched with interest. There was gasping and grunting, as the dull sound of blows issued from that wriggling bundle, and then one of them went catapulting out of the fray as Bob got both his feet against the fellow's body and straightened his sturdy legs like pistons ! How that fight would have ended the watchers could only guess for at this critical moment, a harsh grating voice cut in through the excited babble of the audience.

"What the devil is going on here?" The combatants sprang apart, and Bob rose to his feet panting to stare into the cruel shifty eyes of his enemy—Berkeley.

"Oh, so it's you again Bob, is it? What bullying stuff are you trying out on your companions this time?" Bob stared straight into the man's eyes. If it's possible for one fellow to mess around with all these guys, then I've been bullying. One of them hit me with a tomato !"

"He's telling lies Mister Berkeley," cried the culprit, "he set on me for nothing !"

The man grinned wickedly. "I believe you Cyril," he said, "I know he always starts the quarrels here. This time I will make an example of him !" he turned to Bob. "Get into the study room and wait there for me !" Bob stared at the man contemptuously and moved away towards the building. He headed straight for the study room. Inside the study he lounged about on one of the desks, and waited for the tyrant to appear. He knew he would get a severe lashing : it scarcely worried him. The doot opened and Berkeley entered with his shirt sleeves rolled up, and a long leather thong in his hand.

"Come here !" he snapped.

Bob did not move, but continued to lounge on the desk, his eyes weighing up the tyrant.

"Come here at once you puppy," growled Berkeley swishing the thong a couple of times.

Bob viewed the man's thick forearms and bulky body. Easily over eleven stone. Bob himself was no child. He weighed close to nine stone of fighting bone and muscle. Should he pitch into the tyrant and try to batter him up? While he was hesitating, the man strode up to him and struck out with the lash. The sharp leather cut into his shoulder. Before the lash could fall again, Bob had sprung up and balancing on the balls of his feet he put every ounce he had into a perfect blow. A great surge of joy—sheer unmitigated joy ran through every fibre of his body as his fist crashed against the bearded chin of his tormentor. Bob saw his enemy twist sideways, and slump to his knees. At last he had conquered! With a low cry of triumph on his lips he snatched up the leather thong and laid it across the back of the coward, with all the force of his strong young arm. He did not care where the strokes fell.... Berkeley's shirt was in ribbons!.... "Stop. You young dog, you're killing me. Help. Help!"

His voice echoed through the building. The two other attendants rushed in. After a ferocious fight, the boy was finally overpowered, and dragged away down the long corridor. Still resisting fiercely he was thrust into the punishment room, and the door slammed shut. All alone in the bare room, he calmed down slowly. He paced around the room a few times before he finally sat down on the single wood chair that the apartment sported, and went over the events of the day with relish!

It was evening before the door opened, and one of the attendants called Briggs entered. He brought a plate of food and a jug of water with him. He set them down on the table and smiled at Bob. Bob grinned back. He had no animosity in his heart for Briggs the young Anglo-Indian attendant who had helped to drag him away from Berkeley. Briggs was short and pleasant featured, with a thick mop of brown hair. He knew that the boy was treated very unfairly and whenever it lay in his power, he had done his best to make things lighter for Bob. He coughed as he fished out his cigarette case, and selecting one lit it. He smiled at Bob again. This time sympathetically.

"Do you know what's doing?" he asked drawing on his cigarette.

"No, tell me," replied the boy as he wolfed one of the badly made sandwiches, and took a gulp of water from the jug.

"You're being hoofed off to the reformatory tomorrow!" he grinned and added, "you certainly pasted hell out of that bullying swine Berkeley! If I were not an attendant here, I would have stood by, and laughed myself to death!"

"Hell! is a reformatory any worse than this?" asked Bob as he started on another sandwich.

"It will be for you. You will go from here as a vicious young rascal. Berkeley will see to that!"

"Why do you bother to tell me all this Mister?" asked Bob.

Briggs did not reply. He moved to the doorway and looked out. After bolting the door he returned to the lad's side.

"Look Bob, I want to help you. You're a good kid, and you're being given a shabby deal. Why don't you run away? Hasn't it ever occurred to you, that with a little effort you could get away? Another thing, I happen to know you've been hanging around Snappy Solomon quite a lot—O. K. don't interrupt me. I've kept it to myself: No one knows—now he tells me your fistic abilities are far above the average. Get to one of the big cities, and try to make a man of yourself. You'll never be anything if you hang on in a shoddy joint like this! Now listen I am here to help you. There is your easiest way out!" Briggs pointed a finger to the tree that grew close to the only window of the room. Bob grinned, "I think I will take your advice. Many have run away from this place and have been caught. If I go they will never get me!" "Here take this," said the attendant handing Bob a ten rupee note, "I can afford to lose it, I've won ten times as much on a horse! Now listen carefully. You will get the mail at half-past eleven tonight. The Terminus is Kariapur. From there it's up to you. I've given you the start. When you hear the stroke of half ten, get out of the window, and beat it for the station, and now good luck and show them a clean pair of heels!"

Bob gripped the sinewy hand of Briggs warmly. "I say Mister Briggs you're a dashed sport, if ever I've met one. I'll write to you. I know the address. Only destroy my letters or I may be traced!"

The door slammed, and Bob sat back to think. Seven hours more and he would be free! The thought sent his head whirling. Good old Briggs. What a grand fellow he was! It was sunset before he

stirred from the chair. He might as well take advantage of the fact that he was alone and exercise his muscles! Removing his shirt, he stood by the window. The golden haze of the setting sun tinted the pure white of his torso with a strange hue. His muscles were beautifully developed for a boy of his age, and they rippled under his delicate skin at the slightest movement. The marks on his body—souvenirs of the brutality of Berkeley, stood out dark-blue on his sturdy young back. Bob got down on his hands, and slowly elevated his legs into a perfectly balanced curve. Up and down and around the room he walked on his hands until quite tired, before finally lowering his legs to the ground, and once more assuming the normal standing position. He gazed out of the window. The sun had disappeared, a purple flush marking its flight. He resumed his shirt and once more seated himself in the chair.

To say that Bob was excited would be putting it mildly. Just thirteen years of age, he was on the very threshold of life. When all the world is as yet untired and unconquered! To him the world was *colour-de-rose*—one vast storehouse of unlimited potentialities. He looked at the world with all the faith and unbiassed ardour of a conquering hero! He was waiting impatiently to step into it. Slowly the minutes flew while impatient youth waited frowningly for the zero hour of life—the hour when he would launch himself out, to fight and carve his way through circumstance, and reach the goal he had set himself!.. One might well ask—what was Bob's goal? The answer was under that intelligent brow, and in the determined glitter of his slate grey eyes! Yes, the answer was there, securely locked away.

Time alone could show and would show what mark the lad had set himself, and whether he would reach it!

Darkness came on with amazing rapidity, and the boy stared out at the distant lights that shone through the thick foliage of the tall neem trees. Slowly the seconds ticked away and the darkness grew heavier. At last the clock tower chimed ten. Half an hour more. Suddenly an idea came to Bob he would go and see Snappy Solomon before leaving. Bolting the door from the inner side, he crossed the room and climbed on to the window sill. With a little spring he landed on the broad bough of the tree. In a few seconds he had clambered down the tree and was moving past the long dark arcade. Clambering over the tall walls of the orphanage with an agility born of constant practice, he dropped on to the shadowed pavement and hurried away down the familiar road.

Fifteen minutes later he was lounging in a battered leather cushioned chair in Solomon's rooms.

"So you're beating it, eh?" asked the old pugilist.

"Yes, I'll try and get to one of the big towns, and do something for myself!" replied Bob cheerfully.

"If I were still a professional, I would train you up to be a champ!"

"Hell, don't worry Snappy, may be I will be a champ some day, who knows. Well it's half past ten, I guess I'd better beat it!"

"Cheerio Bob, and take care of yourself, and if you carry on boxing you will be champ some day!"

He shook the youngster's hand warmly and watched him disappear down the street.

After leaving the old boxer, Bob headed straight for the station. He walked briskly, and whistled as he went. Soon he would be on the train, hurtling away through the dark night with Berkeley only a memory. He smiled and hurried on.

VI

BEAUTY AND THE BOY!

Bob made his way through the closely packed crowd on the platform, and in a short while was seated on one of the long benches within the train. He looked about the compartment and saw it was empty. He began to breathe more freely. He let down the shutter of stained glass, and gazed through the window at the large electric clock that hung over the platform. Twenty past eleven. Ten minutes to go! He gazed absently at the noisy crowd. He wondered how Berkeley was doing. Bob grinned as he remembered that perfect punch of his which had sent the bully down on his knees. He felt the knuckles of his right hand: they were slightly painful. A glow of satisfaction surged through him as he mentally pictured the howling squirming tyrant, while he stood over him, and lashed with every grain of power! Good going that: Berkeley would remember that incident till death.

He knew he had not finished with the tyrant as yet. At the back of his childish imaginings he relished the thought of going back as a powerful towering man, and whipping Berkeley to a tatter of blood stained cringing repentance. He smiled as he pictured the face of the tyrant when he found out in the morning that the bird had flown! He thought of the amusing sketches of Berkeley, and the vituperative remarks that he before leaving, had plastered the walls of his prison with. He could imagine the tyrant going over it all with a coat of white wash.

His eyes wandered back to the clock just in time to see the big hand waver and drop another space to mark the flight of another minute. He yawned, stretched out his young muscles like a tired animal, and settled back into a more comfortable position. He shoved his legs on the opposite bench and allowed his head to rest on the arm of the seat. How slowly the minutes seem to drag.... That's the worst of it: when one is desperately in need of a few extra minutes to complete some important job, one finds that time flashes past, and when one wants it to flash past, it lingers on leaden feet, and a dull laziness and impatience comes on, tinged with a strange sort of resignation! So thought Bob as he watched the electric clock through half-closed eyes. One minute to go.... Half a minute.... Fifteen, ten, five seconds.... The whistle shrilled: The clamour and bustle of the crowd rose and fell in waves. With a slight jerk the locomotive moved.... It gathered speed. Soon the brightly lighted station was left behind, and the swift locomotive hurtled through the cold night darkness....

Bob awoke with a jerk. The train was at a standstill. He opened the shutter and poked his head out of the compartment. Kariapur! He jumped off the seat and left the compartment. Leisurely he walked down the platform. He felt hungry. He headed for the refreshment room. A pot of tea and a plate of bacon and eggs plus the usual tip for the uniformed waiter left him with one anna in his pocket. He left the refreshment room and passed through the crowded archway. In another moment he was in the street. As he walked along, he gazed with interest at the buildings, and

the busy moving crowd. Soon he came to the fork. Which road should he take? He hesitated for a moment and then pulled his last anna out of his pocket. Heads right, tails left he decided. He spun the coin and caught it in his palm. Heads! Bob stepped along the road on the right of the triangle.

Little did he dream as he walked on, that his entire destiny would be guided by the spin of that coin! All through the morning he walked on, gazing with interest at everything he saw. The morning shadows were steadily growing shorter when he found himself peering over the low walls of the convent. The strong fresh scent of oranges and citrons reached his nostrils. Conscience was a thing that seldom if ever worried the happy-go-lucky boy. He saw the long rows of trees, with the ripe fruits gleaming in the sunshine. Placing his hands on the wall he vaulted over it with ease, and headed straight for the little orchard, with a grin of pleasurable anticipation on his handsome face.

He wasted no time in climbing one of the orange trees and seating himself astride a branch. The rights of ownership did occur to him, but he waived the thought aside, as he peeled orange after orange. Oh boy! they were sugar sweet....

"Do you think it right to climb a tree that does not belong to you, and eat the fruit, my boy?" Bob in the middle of his eighth orange startled at the enquiry voiced in a tone of soft music, and stared downwards. He found himself gazing into a pair of deep violet eyes. Somewhat abashed he scrambled down and found himself gazing at a

young lady. The boy mentally decided that she was the most beautiful person he had seen. The pale loveliness of her perfect oval face was crowned with a glorious wealth of red gold hair that glittered wherever the sun-light played on it. "No, not a lady only a grown up girl!" Bob decided as he took in her extremely youthful appearance.

Holding the remaining half of the orange out to her, Bob spoke. "I guess I was very wrong in pinching your oranges," he said, "here's half of the last one still left!" The lady gave a low laugh. "You may as well finish it now!" she smiled, "what's your name?"

"Bob," replied the boy, "what's yours?"

"Mrs. Croxley."

"You're married, eh? I thought you were just a grown up girl!"

Helen laughed again. "My husband died years ago," she said.

"Well you look too young to be called Misses. What is your name, I mean your Christian name?"

"Helen."

"Gosh! It sounds fine. You know it suits you."

"How do you make that out?"

"You're so pretty. I wonder if Helen of Troy looked like you?"

The lady looked away, to hide the rich colour that flooded her face and then looked back, "Don't be a silly child," she said, "Helen of Troy was the most beautiful lady in the world. The Greeks fought against the Trojans for ten years to get her back!"

But Bob was not to be shaken so easily.

"Silly child—my eye! I'd fight ten years for you: Why I'd fight twenty years for you. I think you are very beautiful!" He smiled and gazed boldly at the rich beauty of Helen.

She laughed good-naturedly. "What extravagant words from a child! What's your age Bob?"

"Sixteen!" lied the boy gallantly drawing himself to his full height. Helen looked at him. He was about five feet five inches of strapping handsome boyhood. He looked fully sixteen.

"May I call you Helen?" he asked suddenly.

"You may, Bob."

"What's your age?"

Helen laughed. "Ah ha," she smiled, "a lady never tells her age!"

Bob turned away. "Well I must be going, I am sorry for robbing your fruit!"

"Where are you going?" asked Helen.

"To be quite frank, I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. I have nowhere to go!"

Helen was greatly intrigued. "Wait a bit," she said softly, "you are such a peculiar boy. Now if you tell me everything, I may be able to assist or advise you!"

"Promise you won't give me away and I'll tell."

"I promise!"

Seated on a low bench, Bob told the entire story of his life, with a grim humour and an insensibility to his own sufferings, that made Helen's heart go out to him. When he ended his narrative, he lolled back luxuriously on the bench and breathed

in the sweet fragrance of the garden ; his eyes lazily following the perambulations of a solitary bee that buzzed uncertainly around a bush of China rose. Helen Croxley gazed at him with interest. His strong determined face told her he was not the type to go under easily. He was the kind that fight their way to the surface through all the whirling under-currents of circumstance and misfortune, or die in the attempt. At last she spoke.

"Now that you've told me everything about yourself, I feel that it is my duty to help you on. I cannot stand the thought of you being caught, and taken back. You've already been treated pretty rottenly by that beast you call Berkeley, and a further spell of life in a reformatory will do you more harm than good," she paused and smiled charmingly at Bob, "I suppose you must have been really hungry when you saw the oranges!"

"Yes, I was a bit hungry," said the boy airily.

"Come Bob, I will get you something to eat, and then I will see what I can do to help you on your way!" The lad rose with an alacrity that only hunger could induce, and walked by the side of his new ally!

From the shadows of the arcade, Mother Margaret watched Helen steer the lad towards the kitchen and smiled. She had many friends among the local school children, who were constantly around the garden, or kitchen, knowing well that the good natured lady would always load them with fruits, or some rare tit bit that only an expert cook like Sister Henrietta could produce. The delectable odour of cooking food reached Bob and it was all

he could do to restrain his impatient feet, to keep pace with the smaller steps of Helen....

After Bob had feasted himself on the well prepared food that Helen placed before him, and he felt it quite impossible to eat any more, he rose, and leaned back against the kitchen wall. "Well, I'll say that's the best feed I've ever had! Thanks a million, and now Helen I think I'd better beat it." Helen smiled at the boy. "Will you go into the garden, and wait there?" she asked, "I want to give you something before you go!" Obediently the boy strolled back to the garden, and lolled about on the bench. He wondered if there were many others in the world as beautiful and as kind as Helen. In his boyish mind he decided that he would return to her when he had a fortune, and ask her to marry him! He heard a step, and looked up. It was Helen. She sat down beside him.

"Now Bob I want to ask you where you intend to go from here, and what you intend to do," she said quietly.

Bob grinned. "I wanted to get to one of the larger cities and try to get work of some sort: I guess there is someone somewhere who could do with assistance from a chap like me!"

"Take this Bob, you will need it in any place, let alone in a big city!" she said pressing a little black leather purse into his hands, "and please write to me if ever you are in any sort of trouble, and need help. My address is in the purse."

Bob felt terribly embarrassed.

"Say, Helen you've been too dashed good to me. I hope I am able to return this money to you

soon : but your kindness I know I will never be able to repay ?”

Helen rose to her feet, “and now I must be going : I’ve got quite a lot of things to do !”

The boy got to his feet. Strange thoughts were tearing through him in a whirl. He spoke in a hesitant tone. “Helen you’re perfectly fine. You’re the kindest and prettiest person I’ve met When I grow up I’ll come back and ask you to marry me—If I do : will you refuse me, eh ?”

Helen blushed at his frank boyish admission of love, and then laughed in a low mellow tone. “Very well, Bob, if you return a great man, I will marry you,” and bending forward, she kissed the boy lightly on his lips The next moment she was gone. In a happy, semi-dazed frame of mind Bob vaulted the low wall and moved away from the precincts of the convent.

At a slow pace he moved through the graveyard. His eyes lazily scanning the ornamental tombstones as he passed them. On almost all were the dried remanents of flowers. Suddenly his eyes rested on a plain marble slab. Wild roses grew all around it, while at its head lay a large boquet of fresh flowers. Bob wondered why this grave alone had fresh newly plucked flowers on it. Prompted by curiosity he moved closer and read the plain inscription on it—*“In Loving memory of my darling Jack.”* He wondered if dead people appreciated floral tributes and beautifully ornamented tombstones. What an evil thing to be buried in the cold damp earth ! A shudder shook him. He suddenly realized that every thought, every action, every second of life took one nearer to that unavoidable end. How strange and ghastly to think

that one day his strong perfect body would be cold and lifeless ; ready to be interred in the unsympathetic earth where it would crumble to dust.....to nothingness !....Bob found himself wondering if there was another existence. He grinned cynically and shrugged his shoulders. If there was another world, it must be a darned stupid one ! He wondered what happiness could be enjoyed by departed souls if they just flitted around the Almighty, with filmy transparent bodies and ghostly wings, holding harps in their hands and perpetually saying, "Hallelujah !" The idea of it brought another grin to his handsome face. How terribly stupid they must feel ! and God, how about Him ? Surely he could not enjoy such stupidity ! After all if God were really perfect, the last thing he would want, would be to have hordes of holy maniacs jumping around Him shouting "Hallelujah !" Just imagine sitting down in Heaven and enjoying such unmitigated stupidity for eternity ; while far beneath in Hell people who were guilty of gratifying the natures and passions that God imbued them with were to suffer for eternity ! What sadistic incongruity ! And to think of the deluded millions who worshipped a God Who could allow such a thing !

A mental picture of the tyrant Berkeley, with wings, harp, halo and beard all complete ; jumping madly before the Eternal and screeching "Hallelujah !" at the top of his raucous voice in order to be heard above the others and be granted greater favour, came before Bob as he stood thinking and he laughed outright at it.

He automatically picked up a stone and slung it at a gaily coloured woodpecker that settled on the

tall eucalyptus that stood nearby. He watched the vivid splash of colours as the bird flew away, while the stone crashed harmlessly against a branch before thudding to the earth. He wondered if the woodpecker had a soul. Did all animals have souls? Most definitely yes. After all man is nothing more than an enlightened animal—his body performs all the functions of an animal—There is nothing godlike or elevated about the common everyday functions and wants of the human body, it tends entirely to the animal; why then should man claim to be something superior—The possessor of an immortal soul! Why should man who possessed and exhibited passions baser than any beast; lay claim to a thing like a soul? What right had man to imagine that the Immortal would grant him another existence after he squandered away this one in sin and wickedness?

The distant clock tower struck two. He listened intently to the reverberations as they grew fainter and fainter on the afternoon air. The train for Callapore left at seven that evening. Bags of time! The quiet lethargy of the little grave-yard seemed to infect him. He looked around. He saw the grotto of the Virgin, lazily he scrambled across the low wall and climbed the grotto. Disrespectfully he gripped one of the cold marble feet of the statue, and scrambled inside in the deep hollow behind it. He pulled his coat off and made a cushion for his head. He lay back, and stretched his body out in the dark hollow of the grotto. He felt luxuriously lazy and his eyelids drooped. He stole a glance at the profile of the statue. It reminded him strangely of Helen, only she was more beautiful, had red gold

hair and the rich warm colour of life in her cheeks. He closed his eyes and fell asleep

The distant clock struck five. Its metallic echoes pierced through the filmy veil of sleep and reached Bob. He opened his eyes and raised himself on an elbow. He gazed at the grave-yard, and stiffened. Helen was kneeling by the tombstone that he had noticed earlier in the afternoon. He saw her lips moving. Slowly he climbed out of the grotto. She was quite alone with her prayers. Having no desire to intrude on the thoughts of the kneeling woman, Bob slipped away quietly through the orchard. The gloomy mystery of the graveyard, and the thought provoking memories of the convent slipped away from Bob's mind like a mantle as he once more stepped along the tarmac roads and headed for the station. The only memory that persisted most strongly in his brain was a vision of violet eyed, red-haired loveliness. In his boyish childish way, Bob had fallen absolutely in love with his benefactress, and small wonder !

That evening the runaway sat in comfort on the cushioned bench of the compartment, while the outward bound express swept along the iron track towards Callapore. The cold rush of the night air flung back his tousled hair and filled his young lungs with invigorating ozone. He drew out the purse that Helen had given him and examined it. It still contained a considerable sum of money : Bob did not bother to count it. He looked at the little square of card with her address neatly printed on it — 'Mrs. Helen Croxley, Convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor, Hopper Lane, Kariapur' — He would drop her a line at the first opportunity. With

an idle curiosity he looked through the other pockets. His questing fingers drew out a photograph. It was of Helen. A surge of joy shot through him. It was an old print, one that she had evidently forgotten about. He smiled at his good luck. Now he had an actual photo of his goddess with him. Carefully he replaced the photo in the purse, and folding it, he dropped it into his pocket. The train dashed on towards Callapore, while the boy drowsed within the compartment, and mentally planned a future of fame, with great wealth—and Helen! In distant Kariapur, Helen lay in bed, and thought of the lonely waif she had helped. Would she ever see him again, would he write, would he rise to be something worthwhile, or would he merely be claimed by wickedness and vice in the large city of Callapore or be found out and returned to the orphanage or locked in a reformatory where he would ultimately turn bad?.....Helen closed her eyes and fell asleep.

VII

THE BOXER AND THE BOY!

The express slid to a stop at the great city of Callapore. Bob sat up with a jerk. He looked through the window. "Callapore, huh!" he muttered as he shook the drowsiness away and followed the other passengers out of the compartment. He elbowed his way through the surging crowd, and in another minute had handed in his ticket and crossed the barrier. Out in the street he regarded the trams with interest for a while, before crossing the road and moving away....

Rudy Merino walked down the lonely road with an easy stride. He shrugged his massive shoulders as he walked. Rudy was thinking of his match with Black Lightning which was to take place the next day. Rudy—better known to the general public and boxing fans as 'the Tiger of Java,' stood five feet ten inches in his socks and had a massive body of corded iron muscle. His jaw was square and his chin aggressive. He sported a broken nose, and a deep scar over his right eye—These were souvenirs of his numerous fistic encounters in India and the Far East.

His face was handsome in a rugged, manly way, and his jet black mop of hair was neatly cut and brushed back. His eyes were dark brown, watchful and defiant. Just twenty-eight he was at the zenith of physical perfection. As he walked, he thought of "Black Lightning" the Negro contender for the heavy weight crown of the east. Tomorrow night would decide whether he or Rudy would meet the champion in a challenge bout. Without being

egoistic or swollen headed, Rudy knew he would whip the Negro contender, when they met the following night. As he walked along in this preoccupied state of mind, he did not notice the three skulking figures that lurked in the shadows of the lonely road. Slowly they closed on him. The first intimation that Rudy had of danger was a cruel chopping blow that thudded on the side of his head!....

Bob wandered through Callapore, feasting his gaze on the tall buildings, grand gardens and busy streets. Towards midday he entered a large cafe, and satisfied his hunger with steak, chips, tomatoes and buttered bread. After finishing his third glass of lemonade he left the place and sauntered away.

The posters on the walls of buildings and sign boards attracted him. Tomorrow night Black Lightning and the Tiger of Java would meet in a contest which would decide who would meet the champion. Bob's eyes glistened and his skin rose in tiny prickles as he gazed lovingly at a large poster that displayed the mighty bodies of the two boxers. Instinctively he took a liking to the handsome strongly-set boxer who was billed as the Tiger of Java. Somehow the squat features, wide set eyes and hunched shoulders of the Negro, made Bob dislike the man. There seemed to be something wicked and sneering in the fellow's countenance, that reminded him of Berkeley!

The sun had set, and the bright lights of the city illuminated the streets, as Bob stood there with a few other lads of his age and admired the poster. Suddenly, one of the boys exclaimed excitedly, "I say you fellows, look there's Rudy Merino the

Tiger of Java. Boy what a build!" Bob looked eagerly in the direction indicated and saw the Tiger of Java crossing the street. Quietly and unobtrusively he slipped away and followed Rudy. He intended to overtake the pugilist and ask him for a chance to fight in one of the subsidiary bouts. He wondered what reply he would get.

The boxer left the more frequented roads and headed down a dimly lighted lane. Bob followed. He saw the three skulking figures suddenly converge on the unsuspecting man and realized there was foul play afoot. He dashed forward to help. As the lurking figures closed on Rudy Merino, Bob weighted in. Rudy's powerful right shot out as he staggered back, and smashed into the face of one of his attackers; at the same moment Bob's muscular young body crashed into the fight with the impetus of a charging bull. His clenched fist shot out in a perfectly timed blow that sent the largest of the attackers reeling back. He sprang forward and his fist sank into the pit of the man's stomach. The fellow doubled up. Bob whirled around to see the Tiger of Java send down the last of his attackers with a wicked uppercut.

"Good boy!" grinned Rudy, "you sure can hit, but come along, let's get out of here before a crowd gathers!"

At a quick pace Rudy and his young helper left the darkness of the lane, while the boxer explained.

"I was going down to Martins for a glass of beer and took a short cut. See the result? If it weren't for you, I would have been beaten up badly!

Thanks a lot for weighing in. Care to come along with me?"

"Sure. I was following you, I wanted to speak to you and I saw those jinks jump you!"

"What did you want to speak to me about?"

"I wanted you to fix me up for fight. You see, I am a runaway and have nowhere to go: but I can sure use my fists."

"Listen kid, you've got me all knotted up. Here's Martine's. Come on in and have a drink, and you can tell me everything!"

The Java Tiger steered his new friends into Martins, and led the way to a secluded corner.

"Two beers!" said Merino to the waiter who hurried away.

"Gee that's good of you, but I guess I am too young to drink. Snappy Solomon warned me never to drink," said Bob in a flustered voice.

"Snappy Solomon! Say kid d'you know that old guy. What's your name?"

"Bob."

"O. K. Go on tell us everything. I won't let you down."

"Well, I was in an orphanage, never had any parents. The chap there—a fellow named Berkeley—used to flog me everyday for no reason at all. The last time he did it, I turned round and panned him out. He was going to shove me into a reformatory so I ran away. I knew Snappy very well, he used to train me to scrap whenever I could sneak out of the orphanage. I tried to get work at heaps of places over here, but there's nothing doing. I've got nowhere to go, and nothing to do, but I can scrap, and I am willing to fight any time!"

The waiter placed two glass tankards of beer on the marble topped table and melted away. Merino thoughtfully regarded his young companion. "Go on, drink it. It won't hurt you. Beer is very good; except when you drink it in large quantities!"

Obediently Bob raised the tankard and sipped the drink. It had a sweetish bitter taste. Lemonade was much better! He took a few large gulps to show Merino he was not scared, and set it down. Merino pulled out a cigarette case from the breast pocket of his neatly cut lounge suit, and after carefully selecting a cigarette, he lit it. He dropped the burning match into the porcelain ash tray and spoke.

"Tell you what, you stay with me and I'll train you to fight. I'll fix you to fight tomorrow: how's that?"

For a full minute Bob thought he was dreaming. At last he spoke. "Hell Mister Merino that's grand. I..I don't know how to thank you, you're a swell guy!"

"Don't call me Mister Merino. I'm Rudy to all my friends."

"O. K. Rudy!"

Rudy pulled his coat sleeve up and glanced at the watch on his wrist. "Half past seven," he remarked, blowing out a thin stream of smoke and finishing his beer, "and now I'll take you down to the Gym and see how you shape, before I fix you for a scrap."

Manfully Bob gulped down the remainder of the beer, and followed Rudy out of the place. After half an hour's walking, Rudy and his portege reached the gymnasium. In silence Bob followed his idol

into the place. "O. K. Kelly," said Rudy to a fellow who was slamming a heavy bag around with mittened fists, "get a pair of gloves on. I want you to spar with this kid. I want to see how he shapes!" he turned to Bob, "Right Bob, get stripped, and get a pair of gloves on."

Obediently Bob pulled off his coat and shirt. It was all that Merino could do to repress an exclamation at the beauty of the lad's development.

"What's your age Bob, sixteen?"

Bob grinned. "So you're bluffed as well?" he asked, "no, I am not sixteen. I'm only thirteen."

"Hell's Bells! You've got a better set at muscles than most professional bantam weights. No wonder Snappy bothered to train you!"

Slipping a pair of gloves on, Bob held his hands out to Merino, who quickly tied the laces. Bob clambered into the ring. Kelly was already there. Rudy looked at his watch.

"O. K. Time, and you Kelly take it easy, the kid's only a thirteen years old!"

Kelly an old time hard bitten professional, started with his usual tactics. He swung a wicked left to Bob's mouth, but was met by a cross counter that rattled his jaw. In a few moments Kelly realized that he was up against a class fighter: one whose defence his cunning fists could not fathom. Merino watched in amazement as the prodigy landed his blows where and when he liked.

"My God! He'll eat Batty Gibson in the first round," he exclaimed, as with a wicked right hook Bob dropped the veteran to the canvas. Bob rushed across, and helped the older pugilist to his feet.

Spider Kelly—veteran of a hundred fights—grinned sheepishly.

“Holy Hell! Rudy, where did you pick this bloody wild cat up?”

Merino grinned. “I am going to stick him up against Batty. Ring Parnell up and tell him I’ve got a fellow to fight Batty tomorrow.”

“What name shall I give?” asked Kelly moving away.

Merino was about to reply, when Bob interposed.

“Please don’t give my name! I’ll fight incognito, or you know what will happen Rudy!”

“Hell yes! I was forgetting. Oh I have an idea tell Parnell I’ve got a scrapper here whom he can bill as the ‘Masked Unknown.’ It will be an added attraction, and you can enter the ring tomorrow with your face masked!”

Bob leaned back against the ropes of the ring and grinned. “Rudy you certainly have ideas!”

Rudy smiled broadly, and looked at his watch.

“Early yet. Care to do the flicks tonight?”

“Sure thing Rudy. I’ve never seen a picture yet!” replied the boy eagerly.

Merino turned to Kelly who had just returned from the phone, and who was rubbing his jaw tenderly.

“We are doing the flicks to-night, Spider. Let Bob have one of your suits.”

“Sure, Sure,” replied Kelly good, naturedly.

“A kid who can fight like that, can use anything of mine. Come along Bob!”

Kelly lived just behind the gymnasium and it did not take Bob long to wash and dress at his house.

A glow of pride ran through Bob as he surveyed himself in the large mirror. Never before had he worn anything except ill-fitting short pants. Now he saw in the mirror a young gentleman, in a faultless lounge suit, with his hair neatly brushed, and a clean collar, a dull blue tie and a well-polished decent pair of shoes, that gleamed brightly under the electric light.

"O. K. You young wild cat, I hope you enjoy the show. I'll spar you tomorrow if you don't hit so hard!" grinned Spider slapping him on the back as he hurried away to the gym.

"Holy Smoke!" exclaimed Merino as he gazed at Bob, "you're looking all slicked up. That jink's clothes fit you better than they fit him!"

Never had Bob enjoyed anything in his whole life quite as much as he enjoyed the movie that evening.

As they walked back to Merino's lodgings late in the night, Bob listened to the story of the prize fighter's life. Merino told it in short terse sentences.

"Yes, I had a rough time all the way up—something like you. I lost my mother at birth, and at the age of ten I lost my dad. After that I lived with a drunken uncle of mine, who beat me everyday. I ran away from home, and picked up a trade in a workshop. Later I got a job on board a ship—a merchant ship, and deserted her at Singapore. By that time I was a strong husky fellow of seventeen. I strolled into a Fun Fair one day, with my stomach empty and not a sou in my pocket. I stopped outside a booth where some tough looking professionals were offering a money prize to anyone who went three rounds. I was so desperate that I accepted the

challenge and actually knocked the other guy out in the first few seconds of the opening round. After that I refused the money, but accepted their offer and joined the show. I trained hard, and fought hard, and saved my dough until at last I found I was amongst the top notchers. That's about all there is to me!"

Bob who had listened intently to this brief narrative understood why Merino had picked him up, apart from the fact that he weighed in and helped the boxer in the moment of his need.

Rudy lived a block away from the gymnasium run by Spider Kelly, and Bob followed him up the stairs to his apartments. They were large, airy and well-furnished.

"Just your luck, there's a spare bed and mattress here. Here's a pair of shorts to sleep in," said Merino tossing a pair of faded blue shorts to Bob. The lad undressed and drew the shorts on. He folded Spider Kelly's clothes neatly and placed them on a chair before clambering into bed and trying to sleep.

VIII

THE MASKED UNKNOWN

That night Bob was restless. Try as he may, he could not sleep. Thoughts of the coming encounter with Batty Gibson, the redoubtable bantam weight filled his mind. He wondered what Batty looked like. His name suggested something fierce and ugly, as well as punch drunk! His mind tried to picture what Batty's tactics would be like. He tossed about restlessly. Finally, he decided that worrying would not help, and he forced the mental image that he had formed of Batty Gibson from his mind. This did no good, for he found himself thinking strongly of Helen Croxley, and the hectic happenings since he landed at Callapore, and was so providentially picked up by Rudy Merino the boxer. He must write to Helen after his fight with Batty, and tell her of his victory, of course, he must win, he would win! With a vision of her soft violet eyes and red gold hair before him, Bob slowly floated into dream land.

Bob felt his shoulder being shaken, and he opened his eyes. Rudy was standing there in his pyjamas.

"Come along kid, today is going to be busy. I've got to buy you a whole heap of things, and then I want you to warm up for the fight. Have a cold shower and come along for breakfast."

Bob smothered a yawn and entered the bathroom. The stinging cold spray soon dispelled all traces of sleep, and after a vigorous rub down, Bob dressed up in Spider Kelly's suit and entered the adjoining room, where Merino was seated at the

dining table. After breakfast Rudy and Bob went out on their shopping expedition. It was on their return, loaded with a valise of clothing, that Rudy handed Bob a little rubber ball. "Keep squashing that in your hands when you have nothing better to do," he said, "it will help you to clench hard when punching."

After dumping the valise in Rudy's rooms, they went down to Spider's gym and stripped down. It was pretty late, and while Rudy limbered up with a skipping rope, Bob slammed the punch ball around.

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Parnell's Stadium was filled to overflowing, and the dull hum of human voices told Bob that a huge audience were gathered there to watch the spectacular bout between the Tiger of Java and Black Lightning. Bob and Rudy entered through the dressing rooms. In a few minutes Spider Kelly who was there before their arrival, had Bob ready for his bout. Merino gazed appraisingly at his protegee as he stood there all nervousness and brawn. He slapped Bob reassuringly on the shoulder. "You'll win!" he smiled. Bob grinned thankfully as the tight fitting black mask was slipped over his features. "This is the first time I am going to be paid for fighting," he said, every other time I was flogged for scrapping!

"O. K. Bob, come along, your fight next," said Spider, as he led Bob into the vast stadium.

All eyes were on Bob as he entered. He could feel the hot blood surge to his cheeks, and was glad of the mask. He ducked between the ropes and entered his corner. He could hear a faint desultory

cheering. His opponent had not yet arrived. He was terribly nervous. He could feel his body trembling as his seconds helped him to remove the dressing gown. The next moment a thunderous roar arose as his opponent climbed into the opposite corner. He stared at Batty Gibson. The fellow was well over eighteen years. He was about Bob's height with heavily developed shoulders and spindly legs. His head was bullet-shaped and his eyes were wicked and close set. He was if anything, more ugly and frightening than the mental picture Bob had drawn!

Batty in turn gazed contemptuously at the masked boxer who stood before him. He said something to his seconds who laughed outright. The referee in shirt sleeves entered, and in a daze Bob could hear him announcing the fight. He called Batty and Bob to the centre of the ring and spoke to them. "I want you'll to break clean in the clinches, and no fouling. Now shake hands, and at the gong come in fighting!"

Bob touched the other's gloves and turned away.

"Don't worry kid, you're O. K.!" said Spider who was acting as one of Bob's seconds. Bob nodded. The gong sounded. The runaway leaped forward. Gong was all his nervousness. Like a charging catamount he met Batty almost in his corner. He brushed aside the other's left and hooked him viciously in the ribs. With an angry gasp Batty broke away, and dodged into the centre of the ring. Bob followed him. Ducking below Bob's left, Batty slammed his right upward, only to find it land on the other's right. Quick as a

snake Bob's body curved sideways and away from Batty, and his right fist shot forward, sinking deeply in the unprotected stomach. Batty's gasp could be heard all around the stadium as he doubled up and sank to his knees. Bob turned away to the neutral corner as the referee started the count.

One....two.....three.....Batty slowly straightened out. Four....five.....six....He was on his feet waiting. Bob knew it was now or never. Crouching like a panther he advanced while the entire stadium was hushed and eager. Batty landed a jarring left on Bob's chin. The masked boxer twisted his body, in a gracefully roll, and once more drove his right into Batty's stomach. Batty crumpled up and sank to the canvas, amidst thunderous applause. Bob could see the referee counting. He knew it was unnecessary. That last blow delivered slightly downwards, carried every ounce of his body weight behind it. In a haze Bob felt the referee raise his arm, while the crowd cheered madly. Hastily Bob left the ring, and followed Spider to the dressing room.

"Good going kid!" exclaimed Rudy with a grin as he entered the stadium. It was his fight next. A roar of applause tore through the place as the Tiger of Java and Black Lightning entered the ring simultaneously. Bob watched intently, as after preliminaries the two pugilists clashed. Black Lightning lived up to his reputation—ducking, weaving and dodging all around. The fight went uneventfully for four of the scheduled ten rounds. Bob could see plainly that Merino who was offensively defensive was wearing his fast fighting opponent down. The fifth round was full of action.

Black Lightning rushed Merino, who stopped him with a terrific left drive. The Negro went down, but was up before the referee could start the count. The blow had taken the Negro flush in the chest, and Bob could see quite plainly that he was rattled. They came together again and had a sharp exchange of blows before falling into a clinch and being broken apart by the referee. The crowd was on its toes; howling with excitement. Merino weathered a lightning barrage of blows that the Negro laced out at him and breaking through the other's guard, he drove his right into the Negro's features with every ounce of force he could muster. Black Lightning toppled back and hit the boards. He rose slowly and unsteadily at the count of seven, only to be sent down again with a powerful right hook. The gong saved him! His seconds worked feverishly and managed to bring him around. Rudy knew that he was still dazed. As the gong sounded for the sixth round, Merino leaped across the ring like a tiger and crashed his right into the Negro's jaw. Black Lightning slumped uselessly to the boards. The gong could not save him this time. Bob saw the referee raise Merino's arm. He heard the crowd roar. The hair on the back of his neck rose stiffly. Here was fame, excitement, money and publicity! In that brief moment the boy knew that he would never rest content till he wore the heavy weight crown. Quietly Merino and his portege slipped away from the rear of the stadium. In the dark street, the lad slipped the mask off his face and grinned. "You know Rudy, I bet Batty was worrying who I was and what my features were like; that's why I had him all flustered and panned him

out so easy!" Merino smiled. "I never expected you to beat him so easily," he remarked as they strolled home.

The next day, after breakfast Bob sat down to write. He was all alone in Merino's apartment; the pugilist having gone to see about his coming bout with Ginger Harvey the Champion.

After spending the better part of an hour in attempting to write, Bob finally read through his letter to Helen.

"My dear Helen," it ran, "thanks a million for all the help you gave me. I arrived in Callapore early in the morning. I spent the whole day trying to get work, but it was no use. This is a very big city; but they seem to have no use for an inexperienced youngster. I rambled around and admired the fine buildings, the statues and gardens. I struck luck quite unexpectedly—it was like this—I was admiring a large poster advertising the prize fight that was to take place between two leading professional boxers the next evening, when one of these boxers a grand fellow by the name of Rudy Merino happened to stroll by. All the fellows gaped at him. I don't know what made me do it, but I followed him with the idea of asking him to fix me for one of the supporting bouts. Well, he went down a dashed dark lane and some things set on him. I weighed in, though I know he could have managed without my help. The upshot of it all was that I got quite pally with him and he not only offered to fix me for a fight the next night but also threw open his doors to me. He asked me to stay with him and train with him. Of course I, was only too glad to accept. Yesterday I fought as a professional at

Parnell's Stadium and panned a guy by the name of Batty Gibson in the first round. I was paid a hundred rupees for the fight. Of course I fought as the 'Masked Unknown' with a black mask over my face, because I guess Berkeley reads the papers, and it would not do to have my name printed in them! By the way I go as Rudy's younger brother and everyone calls me Bob Merino over here! Rudy won his fight on a knockout also! After his next fight with the Champ, he intends to leave India and tour the Far East and Australia. Of course he is taking me too and I'll fight as well! Gosh, you don't know how excited I feel. I am getting a fight the next time Rudy fights, and I hope I win again. I know you hope I win as well! I don't intend to stop till I am the Champion of the East, and then I will come to Kariapur, and ask you if you remember what you promised me in the garden before you left me. I guess I've written enough to bore you stiff; so I'll ring off—Yours most sincerely, Bob Merino."

Satisfied with his somewhat lengthy letter, Bob folded it, inserted it into an envelope and sealed the flap. He next addressed the letter and fixed a stamp on the corner. He felt strangely elated after having done this, and he whistled as he closed the doors, and left the place. After posting the letter in a pillar box across the street, he made his way to Spider Kelly's gym.

Rudy was stripped to the waist, and covered with a bath of sweat, as he punched the ball fast and furiously. Bob stood by and watched: his right hand rythmically compressing the rubber ball that Rudy had given him. The boxer gave the ball a

parting barrage of quick savage punches and turned around with a smile. "You better put in some training," he said pantingly, "I've seen Parnell and fixed you for another fight. This time you will get Baby Hossein the fastest of all the bantam's around here, and, boy, he carries some punch in his right fist!"

Bob raised his eye brows slightly at this bit of intelligence. "I'm not bothered," he replied laconically as he stripped himself naked and donned a pair of Spider Kelly's boxing shorts. He pulled a pair of mitts on, and manœuvered around the ball. Rudy watched with admiration, as he crashed the ball around with blows that would have done credit to a champion. The lad could certainly punch! He could turn very much better with twenty days of hard training. Yes, there were that many days before the actual tournament. Merino turned to Spider who stood nearby.

"Listen Spider, you know exactly how Hossein fights. I want you to spar with Bob and I want you to adopt his style. You are almost as quick: so you'll do."

"O. K." replied Spider shortly.

A few days later, on his return from the gym, Bob found a letter awaiting him. He knew it was from Helen. Eagerly he tore it open, while Rudy watched him with a smile.

"Bobby Dear," it ran, "thanks ever so much for your letter. I knew you would write. So you've turned a professional boxer! You can imagine how surprised I am. You never struck me as a bruiser, but then I suppose appearances are deceptive. I am glad to know you've won your

first fight. You must be creating a sensation—fighting with a mask! I am very pleased to know that this boxer Rudy Merino has adopted you. Perhaps you'll may come to Kariapur some day, and stage a fight. If you'll do, be sure I'll be in a ringside seat to cheer you. There's one thing I want to ask you—please do not neglect your education. You will have bags of spare time as a professional. Spend it in study: you will never be sorry for doing it.

So you really want to marry me when you are a great man—The champ of the East? What an awfully persistent boy you are! No I wont forget my promise. If you are still of the same mind, I'll marry you. You have my promise, because I know there is no fear of this happening. By the time you are a great man I will be old and ugly. Besides there will be bags of girls—pretty ones—who will scramble madly to wed a handsome prize fighter! When is your next fight? Let me know how you fare. The church bells are ringing. I must go down and pray. I wont forget to say a prayer for you. I will write to you another time, and at a greater length: till then adieu.

Your pal always—Helen."

Bob felt a burning thrill of pleasure as he started to re-read the letter. He did not know it, but he was blushing. Rudy grinned as he watched him. "Who's the girl Bob?" he asked with a laugh.

"Eh, What—what d'you mean?" asked Bob flushing guiltily.

"Say kid, you're one mighty young kid to be in love!" replied Merino.

"How d'you know?" countered Bob hastily folding the letter.

"Listen kid, a boxer's eyes are quick and watchful: they've gotta be. Your face telegraphs a whole lot of useful information to me as you stand there and read: then you ask me how I know!"

"O. K. You've guessed right, I am in lovê, but I guess I don't stand a chance. She says she will marry me when I am Champion of the East. Besides she says she is a grown up who is too old for me, and she says she will be old and ugly when I am Champ of the East; so you see she is only making excuses to get away from her promise!"

Merino was on the point of laughing outright, but he checked himself. Something in the boy's eyes and tone told him that Bob was never more serious in all his life. His scarred face wrinkled into a sympathetic smile.

"Never mind Bob," he said kindly, "she wont get a chance to back out. You're thirteen now. In another five years you will not only be a grown man, and a heavy weight but you'll be the Champ as well: that's if you continue to train and fight as you are doing at present. So, if I were you I wouldn't bother. You know Bob something tells me in five years you will realize all your dreams!"

Little did the pugilist dream how correct his words—spoken merely in sympathy—would turn out. The frank tone of the other won Bob over, and impulsively he pulled out his purse and fished for the photograph of Helen.

"Say Rudy, look. Isn't she beautiful?" he asked enthusiastically.

Rudy Merino looked at the photo for a while. "Yes Bob, she's one of the most beautiful girls I've seen," he replied, as he handed Bob back the photo.

Bob replaced the print in the purse, and returned the purse to his pocket. The world certainly seemed rosy coloured to the young professional as he flung himself in a low desk chair, and built his dream-castles with all the ardour of which a successful thirteen year old is capable!

IX

THE CHILD—MAN ?

The days that followed were spent in heavy training in Spider Kelly's Gymnasium. Each successive day made young Bob a better boxer and a harder puncher. It was quite a common sight to see the little wildest trading punches with Rudy Merino, and absorbing punishment that the average bantam weight would flinch to receive. But the young pugilist's education did not end there. His spare time was spent in study. It was Helen's wish after all ! Among his few and treasured possessions were a book of Shakespeare, an English Grammar, a dictionary, and various other books by well-known authors : which he picked up from the different bookstalls of Callapore. Naturally intelligent, the lad was able to educate himself fairly well with the help he got from Rudy, and a few of his more or less educated friends.

Beautifully formed, handsome, intelligent, only thirteen years old, and a professional pugilist earning his keep, Bob Merino was a strange paradox. A deadly leather-slinging customer with a cold glint in his eyes while in the arena of pugilism ; at other times he was kind open hearted and thoughtful ! To Bob fistic fame was only a means : not end ! The days passed rapidly until the crucial night arrived.

Once more Bob heard the dull roar of the crowd. Once more with his flushed face masked behind the concealment of a thin black strip of silk, he entered the stadium, and waited in his corner, listening in a semi-detached way to the instructions of Spider. Once more he watched the referee go

through the routine of his duties and he touched the gloves of his opponent, and returned to his corner, impatiently waiting for the gong.

As the gong rang, he leaped out of his corner all eager nervousness. Baby Hossein was a handsomely built hard hitting Turk. In this case, the appellation 'Baby' was entirely unfounded. Far from being young and playful he was a fully grown man, and extremely dangerous! Bob let out a few tentative lefts which were easily countered by the Turk, and then Hossein flashed in under Bob's guard and drove a perfect left at his chin. It connected, and rattled Bob badly. Instinctively Bob brought his right up in a powerful hook. It thudded against the muscular chest of Hossein, and both the boxers fell into a clinch.

The referee broke them apart. Bob changed his tactics and backed away slowly. Somewhat confident the other approached slowly until he had Bob in the corner. Quickly the lad feinted the way Spider had shown him, and as Hossein momentarily deceived covered his point, Bob drove his right at the uncovered solar plexus. A savage joy thrilled him as his fist sank into the unprotected flesh. He could feel Hossein's escaping breath fan his bare shoulder, and he swiftly drove his right upwards in a short arc. A wonderful nutty feeling thrilled through the fibres of his arm, as his fist connected with the other's jaw and straightened him up for a brief fraction of a second. Bob heard the dull thud as the other collapsed and struck the boards. The referee started the count....One....two....three....The gong!

Baby Hossein was well and truly out. He was unable to stand when the gong sounded for the second round. The fight was over. The crowd rose on its toes and applauded as Bob hurried away to the dressing-room.

That night was wildly exciting for Bob, for his friend Rudy knocked the veteran champion—Ginger Harvey—five times to the boards before finally sending him down for the count. At last Rudy Merino the gong to gong punch merchant was the heavy-weight champion of the East!.... That night Bob slept and dreamed of Helen.... of fistic fame and new adventures in Rangoon.... Singapore.... Batavia.... Manilla.... Australia!

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The days sped by. In the peaceful quiet of the citron scented evening, with the purple haze of the dying sun glancing off her red gold hair, Helen read and re-read the long letter that was written in an unformed boyish hand. A smile that was all sympathy and love, curved her sweet mouth as she perused the closely written lines.

“—I hope you’re keeping fine. Here is great news. Rudy won the championship, and I outed my opponent in the first round. Perhaps you read of it already in the local papers. We will be leaving India in a couple of days. Rudy has a programme of fights all chalked out. I feel terribly happy to think I owe you all this. I am doing as you wish. I spend all my spare time studying. I have a book of Shakespeare’s plays, and one of Tennyson’s poems. Say, Tennyson’s poems are grand: don’t you like them? I wish I could write

poems like them. I spend my time trying. I wrote one poem the other day. Spider Kelly could not understand what it meant, and Rudy just read it through and smiled. I know you will like it. Here it is—

Golden Wings!

With Golden wings he soared on high,
He rode the winter cloud,
And far beneath he saw the earth,
Wrapped in a cold grey shroud.

He tossed the dew drops from his locks,
And lightly sprang away,
Then spreading out his dazzling wings,
He swept into the grey.

He came upon her in the mist,
Her face was loveliness,
But yet her heart was hard as stone,
And cold as ice her kiss.

"Bide not beside me Golden Wings,
Our love cannot be true,
And tho' our paths so often cross
I'll never come to you!"

But as she turned to dart away,
He grasped her firm to kiss,
The frozen marble of her throat,
In wild ecstatic bliss.

She drooped within his fiery grasp,
Beneath his kiss she died,
He soared away on Golden Wings,
Remorseless—Satisfied—?

Well what do you think of it. Please don't laugh at it, or you will only discourage my puerile

efforts, and I will come to a standstill! I know my efforts will never be read by the millions: but it isn't for them. It is for you and you only. Sometimes when I have nothing to do I sit and dream of that citron scented garden. Remember how you caught me pinching oranges? Gosh Helen, I was so hungry that time that I could have eaten the hind leg off a mule. Oh, I almost forgot: I showed your photo to Rudy the other day, and he says you're one of the most beautiful girls he has seen. It's the photo you forgot to remove from the purse you gave me. It's rather faded. How about sending me another one? A new one without any creases or cracks. Please! It's going to be fearfully exciting for me when we sail from here. You can use the same address when you reply: Spider Kelly will forward all our letters. By the way—you must not be angry with me, but I have sent you by money order all the dough you lent me. I know you don't want it, but you can use it to help some one up and on; also I've sent you a parcel. I won't tell you what it is. That's a surprise for you. Your kindness—I told you I can never repay, but please accept the paltry gift in the parcel as a token of my gratitude.

In any case I do not think you have any right to refuse a present from me when you have promised to marry me on my return!....

Strange emotions filled Helen's heart as she folded the letter and stood watching the fading purple of evening. Somehow she caught herself wondering what thoughts had prompted Bob to write a poem of that type. It was really a good effort for a young boy who had spent most of his time in evading study of any sort, but the theme of the poem:

was it merely about a sunbeam and a dewdrop or did it mean something deeper.... Was the boy really madly in love with her?.... After all sixteen years is no small age. Another four or five years and he would be a grown man! Suppose he returned a Champion, with a large bank balance and asked her to remember her promise?.... Helen suddenly felt her heart beat faster. Would she be frightened or pleased, or would she merely laugh? After all she would be thirty-three years in four years time and Bob would be just twenty. Absurd!.... And yet, why was she so anxious.... She saw Mother Margaret walking towards her, and turning away hastily, she surreptitiously slipped the letter she had just been reading into the bosom of her frock, and trying to be as casual as ever, she turned away and fell to examining a bed of flowers. The holy woman passed her with a kindly smile, and Helen moved away towards the living quarters.

Alone in her room she re-read the letter, and sat thinking for a long while before finally writing the following lines:—

"Thanks for your letter. It was awfully silly of you to worry about the money: any way since you have returned it, I will use it to help some one else. It's awfully kind of you to send me a gift. I wonder what it is: it will arrive to-morrow. I only hope you've not made it a very expensive one! Yes I will accept it and keep it, as a gift from the second young gentleman who has fallen in love with me! I think your poem was very pretty, and I am glad to know you spend your time studying! By the way what is the poem really intended to mean? Please let me know—" Somehow Helen was at a loss for

words and she ended her letter thus—"—am very busy tonight and I am afraid I will have to cut this letter short. I will write you a long letter later on—"

Rising from the chair, she walked about the room, with a very thoughtful look on her face.

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Slowly the days drew into weeks....months...
..years! Five years passed away. During those years—the halcyon period of Helen Croxley's life, she received a constant stream of letters from Bob, and it was easy to see that with each succeeding year that the boy was fast becoming a man!

X

THE KILLER!

Bob Merino rose to dizzy heights of fistic fame. He no longer fought with a mask. He fought with his face uncovered, and under his own name—Bob Merino! He had grown since the day he first entered the roped square in Parnell's Stadium. Five feet eleven inches in height, he tipped the scales at thirteen stone. Thirteen Stone of perfectly built brawn: a deadly engine of destruction with his fists! Rudy still held the heavy weight championship, but that was because Bob had sworn to himself that he would never engage in a fistic encounter with his friend and benefactor. The only time he would try for Championship honours would be after Rudy had retired, or lost to another!

But a surprise was in store for Bob. At that very moment Jack Cotton the Negro, better known as Black Lightning had set foot in Manilla, eager and willing to once more chance his arm with the hard hitting Champ! It was only a matter of days before the bout was arranged.

With eager eyes Bob watched Rudy defend his title once more. Time and again the Negro contender bored in with a lightning attack only to reel dizzily back before the iron fists of the Champion. It was in the Seventh round that Jack Cotton hit the boards, and stayed there for the count. Rudy Merino had once more successfully defended the coveted title that he had won five years ago in the distant city of Callapore!

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Black Lightning was of the type that is not easily discouraged. Before the month was out, a return fight was arranged. Over confident, and flushed with his long chain of fistic triumphs, Merino neglected his training and spent the days in laziness and the nights in dissipation. When Bob urged him to train, Rudy merely smiled.

"Can't hold the championship for ever, old bean!" he would drawl as he lounged about in bed smoking.

On the eventful day the Tiger of Java was still unshaken and cool. With a calm impassive face he climbed into the ring and under the brilliant arc lights he once more faced the massively built Negro contender.

Clang....The pugilists left their corners and circled each other warily. That round and the next three the Negro spent in carefully avoiding the powerful fists of the Java Tiger. The gong sounded for the fifth round. Rudy left his corner with an impatient look on his face. His dreaded left flashed out. The Negro shifted his head a few inches and as the gloved fist brushed his ear he brought his right over in a cross counter. The blow shook the white boxer down to his toes. As he staggered back he left his abdomen uncovered. Like a flash the other jumped forward. Balancing like an acrobat on the balls of his feet the coloured fighter drove forward with every ounce of force.

"Foul!" cried Bob angrily. He distinctly saw the blow land below the belt, but Merino was between his opponent and the referee, and as he slumped to the canvas in a crumpled heap the referee started the count. "One....Two....There

....Four....Five...." Merino stirred slightly and tried to rise. "Six....Seven...." he slumped back to the boards. "Eight....Nine....Out!"

Through the red haze of anger and disappointment Bob saw the referee raise the massive ebony arm of the Negro. Leaving his seat Bob rushed into the ring. Crouching like a tiger he stared at the sneering brute.

"You low down black pig!" he snarled.

Then his feet left the boards, as he sprang forward and struck the Negro a terrific blow on the point.

Black Lightning's knees never bent. He just heeled over and collapsed. The back of his thick skull made violent contact with the boards. The audience gaped. The red haze cleared from Rudy's eyes and he spoke in an icy voice.

"I'll fight this black scum for the championship anywhere, any time!" he said....

Two days later Rudy Merino the Tiger of Java died in hospital as a result of internal injuries sustained by that foul blow.

Jack Cotton the Negro left Manilla the very day. He headed back for India, carrying with him the heavy weight crown....

Grim, relentless and vengeful, Bob Merino the leading contender followed....

After months of pursuit through all the big cities, Bob at last caught up with the frightened Negro. Unable to evade Bob any longer, Black Lightning agreed to defend his title. Strangely enough the fight was due to take place in Callapore at Parnell's Stadium.

At Spider Kelly's Gymnasium, Bob Merino trained and sparred with a savage ferocity. After a while, it became impossible for Spider to find any sparring partners for the two fisted fury who trained with him. Revenge was the one thought that occupied Bob Merino's entire outlook. In his mind he did not want to fight the Negro just to knock him out for the count: he wanted to fight him to kill him, or cripple him for life. Whenever he was not training, he would sit alone in his rooms with a savage glint in his eyes. But even the fierce brooding pugilist had his softer moments, and these were when he sat down to write to Helen Croxley. On these occasions he would appear boyishly happy, and he would gaze for hours at the framed photo of the red-haired beauty, as he poured his soul into the carefully chosen words of a poem, or the soft caressing lines of a love letter. Bob was a boxer only by trade. At heart he was poet and an artist!

It was early in February, when a suspicion of winter still remained in the soft cool breezes, that Bob sat at the battered table in his room and wrote to Helen Croxley—his goddess: his inspiration.

"My dear Helen," the letter ran, "I am terribly sorry I did not write for so long. Forgive me. Please! Ever since my last letter to you from Manilla, telling you that Rudy died as the result of a foul, I have been dashing from one place to another trying to fix a fight with that rat Jack Cotton. He dodged me as long as he could, but in the end I managed to catch up with him. I am due to fight him in a couple of days. I know I will win. I have got to, because as I told you before, I saw him deliberately foul

Rudy. Of course it is needless to say I will try my level best to injure the rat as much as possible ! But enough of this. I had better write something more pleasant and entertaining or I will definitely bore you ! Enclosed you will find the snapshot of myself that you asked for. Can scarcely recognize me eh ? Well Helen I've returned with a big bank balance, and I am the leading contender for the heavy weight title as well—no, I am not going to remind you of your promise ; not just yet. First I will get the heavy weight crown, and then be sure I will pop the question, because I still love you ! How do you like this effort of mine ? I wrote it last night thinking of you

Before your beauty sweet, serene,
Before your eyes of matchless hue,
My heart did swoon in love's sweet dream,
When first I gazed on you.

The beauty of the moon was naught,
Before your paleness fair,
The golden light of eve was caught,
Within your fragrant hair.

The gentle whisperings of noon,
With your sweet voice could scarce compare,
As I did worship with delight :
Helen my own, my goddess fair.

The sweet perfection of your lips,
Do haunt me all the day,
I wonder if those perfect lips,
Just three small words can say.

Helen my own, you've guessed correct,
The words are "I'll be true !

Or do I long, in vain expect,
Those words to come from you!

Yes Helen, will you be true to the promise you made in the citron garden, or will you forget? These are things I mean to find out. Till then I will hope and dream, for I know I will never love another as I love you. All "revoir, sweet dreams and REMEMBER ME!

With all my love—Bob."

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Parnell's Stadium was packed with people. The great night had arrived—the night when the Negro champion Jack Cotton would defend his title against the leading heavy weight contender Bob Merino! Like a caged animal Bob paced the floor of the dressing room. His eyes had a fierce light in them. It had arrived—this night of nights, the night when he would exchange blows with the black killer. Bob fidgeted about, as Spider Kally bandaged his knuckles. He felt the clinging silk dressing gown flung over his shoulders, and he made his way through the stadium. A tremendous roar greeted him. Bob climbed on to the ring, and slipping between the ropes, he stood in his corner. He watched the Negro pugilist make his way into the ring amidst the cheering of the crowd. He stared at the fellow with a cold hard look. The Negro favoured him with a malignant gold toothed sneer. Evidently he remembered the blow that Bob had struck him in the ring in Manilla. Bob's heart warmed at the memory of that blow. He remembered how Black Lightning had toppled over and fallen like a lump of lead. A powerful surge of

confidence went through Bob's veins. The leering Negro looked like a pigmy to him. An unknown voice seemed to whisper in his heart that he would crush the coloured man and avenge Rudy Merino's death. He could hear the referee announce the fight.

"——fight for the heavy weight championship of the East," he nodded towards Bob, "Bob Merino the challenger thirteen stone," he indicated Black Lightning, "the heavy weight Champion of the East, Jack Cotton better know as Black Lightning, thirteen stone, eight pounds." The howling of the crowd rose and fell in waves. He signalled to the boxers. They approached. "There is no need to say much to you'll, you'll know what I want, a good clean fight, and don't hit while in the clinches. Now shake hands and at the gong come in fighting!" Bob Merino touched his opponent's gloves and turned away. He stepped back to his corner.

"I know how you feel Bob, but do be careful: he is a cool dangerous boxer!" he heard Kelly tell him, as he gripped the ropes hard with his gloved hands and tested the soles of his boxing boots on the tightly stretched canvas.

"Don't worry Spider. I've seen the rat fight three times and I know exactly what he does!"

The gong rang sharply, and the hum of the crowd died down slightly, as the boxers approached each other.

Bob's left came out tentatively. He moved his head a few inches and evaded the Negro's left, at the same moment he dropped his own left on the other's right: stopping it at the very commencement of an upper cut. His own right came up in a hook.

He rose on his toes. That hook had everything Bob possessed and it crashed in just a little beneath, and to the left of the Negro's breast bone. He felt the Negro fly backwards. The ropes stopped him. Almost as quick Bob was on him. He drove his right again. Never before had Bob struck so terrific a blow. It landed on the same spot. Bob knew he had killed the coloured fighter even as the fellow collapsed between the ropes and falling from the ring struck the floor. He felt the referee raise his arm, but he was not interested. He did not hear the crowd roar. He was too happy. He had avenged Rudy Merino's death. Black Lightning was carried away to the dressing-rooms, and from there he was rushed to the hospital, but it was of no use. He died on the way. Later on the post-mortem revealed a badly lacerated spleen....Bob waited impatiently, as Spider Kelly unlaced the gloves and removed the bandages from his knuckles. Spider lit a cigarette butt and watched Bob. After a while he spoke. "I suppose you've heard. He croaked in the ambulance."

"Yes, I've heard. I knew he would die. I wanted to kill the fellow!" replied Bob as he dressed.

"I suppose the swine deserved it," grunted Spider noncommittally, "going anywhere now?"

"Yes, and you're coming with me old timer! I am feeling gloriously happy. In this crooked world of ours, we do not often get a chance to deal out justice, as we would like to, but in this particular instance I've dealt out almost poetic justice. Come along to Martins'. I am feeling like a spot of celebration!"

In far away Kariapur Helen Croxley gazed at the news over her morning tea. Suddenly her eyes went wide. She gazed unbelievably at the glaring print, "BLACK LIGHTNING DIES FIGHTING THE HEAVY WEIGHT CONTENDER! BOB MERINO NEW CHAMPION" She left her tea unfinished and dropping the paper on the table ; she left the refectory and moved away towards the citron garden. It had happened. Her little Bob had actually murdered the man as he had wanted to do ! Her head was whirling !

XI

BEAUTY AND THE MAN!

Striding briskly down the shaded avenue, Bob Merino whistled 'Schubert's March Militaire' as he went. His step was quick and his eye was eager. Handsomely built and handsomely featured, he had caused scores of feminine hearts to throb faster, but Bob had never in all his hectic career bothered about girls. There was place in strong young heart only for one: She was the beautiful red-haired girl whom he had met as a youngster. He ended his whistling and drew out a cigarette case. He lighted one as he walked.

Leaving the road, he crossed the fields, and headed for the distant walls of the cemetery, which gleamed a strange grey in the evening sun. The sun was a dull gold haze as he vaulted lightly over the low walls and made his way along the paths between the graves. He paused at the grave of Jack Wells. There was a bouquet of fresh flowers on it. He remembered the day when he had seen Helen kneel alone by the same grave; while he had crouched in the grotto behind the cold statue of the Virgin. He looked up at the statue of the Virgin. It seemed as though it were only yesterday that it had all happened. Once more he vaulted the wall and approached the citron garden. How beautiful and fragrant the garden smelt!

He stopped dead. Standing by a bed of violets was Helen. Her head was turned away from him. She was gazing at the glorious haze of purple in the west. Bob felt his heart beat like a trip-hammer. He felt as he felt in the ring, just before the gong

announced the commencement of a bout. His body was trembling. He gripped his fists hard and shook off the strange feeling. Slowly he approached Helen: the crepe soles of his shoes made no sound on the path. He was right up behind her. She was rapt in her own thoughts. The delicate fragrance of her reached him, and sent his head reeling. He wanted to take her in his arms and cover her with kisses. For a full minute he stood behind the unsuspecting Helen. At last he broke the silence. "Helen!" he said, in a deep low voice. The girl whirled round with a start at the sound of his voice, and losing her balance would have fallen if it were not for his strong arm going around her.

"Bob you've come!" she exclaimed, and then the lips of the handsome pugilist were pressed against hers. Desperately Helen fought to push him away, but the man seemed to be built of steel. In a few seconds she stopped struggling, as the intoxication of his passionate lips scorched her soul like leaping flames. Slowly her arms twined about his neck and she responded almost fiercely to his love making.

At last Bob drew his head back and gazed at the lovely half-panting creature in his arms. His own body was trembling violently. He looked in the direction of the cloisters, and then picking up the unresisting Helen in his arms he moved away into the citron garden. He stopped on the very verge of the garden, where flowers and bushes grew in wild confusion. He still held her in his arms. She was as alluring as ever. The beautiful oval of her face still possessed the ripe unmarred loveliness of a young girl. Her ivory neck was a column of supple

perfection. The firm contours of her bosom, her shapely white hands and the sweeping lines of her legs, all impressed themselves strongly on Bob.

"My God, Helen you're beautiful," he whispered in a voice hoarse with passion, as he tenderly stroked the luxuriant tresses of dull red gold.

"You told me that once before Bob!" she replied, her lips curving softly.

"Yes, I remember I said it five years ago. I said I would fight twenty years for you. No—I am quite sure Helen of Troy was not as beautiful as you!"

"Bob, do you really mean to tell me you fell in love with me, when you saw me five years ago, and that you've thought of me, and dreamed of me only all that time?"

"Yes!" replied Bob quietly, gazing into the deep violet of her eyes.

"Listen," he said in a low voice, as he drank in her beauty, "I had never known what love meant, till the time I first saw you. True it was in a very boyish way that I did love, but it was love all the same. Don't you see darling? All my life I was beaten and ill-used. I never knew a sister or any other girl. I met you, you treated me kindly. Apart from your treatment of me, you were the most beautiful person I gazed on, so I not only felt deeply grateful, but I fell in love with you: in my own childish way. There is only one difference: That is with each succeeding year I grew more enamoured instead of forgetting you as would have been the case with any one else. Helen can't you see? I owe everything I have accomplished to you!"

"I'm glad of that Bob, but it seems a dream when I try and picture you as the stripling whom I caught pinching oranges from the garden!"

"You know why I have returned, Helen!"

"Yes Bob, you want to marry me I suppose!"

"Yes. Will you?"

Helen turned her head away and fiddled with a nondescript wild flower that grew close by. At last she spoke. "Bob, you've killed a man. Do you think it was good?"

"Listen Helen, haven't you ever wanted to kill a person who wronged you? Answer me truthfully."

"Yes Bob," she replied looking down.

"And if you had the means to do it thrust before you, do you mean to say you would not try!"

Helen fell silent. In the distance the Chapel bells rang.

"You must have worshipped Rudy Merino to feel so strongly about it! I can scarcely blame you."

"Well Helen, will you marry me?"

"I can't answer at once. Give me time."

"Very well. I know this is rather sudden, but will you meet me here tomorrow at sunset?"

"Yes Bob. Where are you staying in town?"

"Suite twenty at Magnolia's."

"I'm going now Bob," she said, as she tried to slip past him, but he caught her in his arms again.

"Aren't you going to even kiss me before going?" asked the boxer as he crushed his lips to hers. For a few moments she lay in his arms, and then she gently disengaged her lips, and slipping out of his embrace she vanished amidst the citron trees. Bob drew a few deep breaths and lit a cigarette. Slowly

and unhurriedly he left the convent garden, and crossing the still cemetery he headed for the distant road, while the lights twinkled through the heavy foliage of the trees.

Early next morning Bob walked out as was his custom. Kariapur had grown since he last saw it. He drank a cup of coffee at a tiny cafe in the public gardens, and then made his way back to the Hotel Magnolia.

As he entered, the reception clerk stopped him. "Letter for you, Sir," he said laconically as he handed Bob a pale blue envelope with his name written across. The writing was Helen's. Bob thrust the envelope into his pocket and hurried away to his apartments. Slamming the door shut, he eagerly tore open the cover and scanned the contents of the letter.

"Dear Dear Bob,

After I left you, I thought things over seriously, and there seems to be only one way out. You've got your whole life before you. You've got your future to think of—your ambitions to realize: Start making them come true. I would hate to be a hindrance, and that is just what I am going to be if we marry! After all you are twenty-one years old; just on the threshold of life and I am thirty-four! True I may be beautiful and young to look at, but facts are facts—I am thirteen years older than you!

I was deeply in love once before: that was about eighteen years back. It ended in tragedy for all concerned. That is why I prefer the cloisters of convent. I hope you understand. No more clandestine meetings for us, because Mother Margaret trusts me, and has actually asked me to take the veil. When

you receive this letter, try to be level-headed, and see things from my point of view. Sooner or later you will see that I am right. I don't want to write more. It hurts. Good-bye, and above all be noble and true to yourself. I am going my way and I'm letting you go yours. Good-bye Bob !

Helen."

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Bob Merino read and re-read the neatly written lines, till their meaning slowly penetrated his brain. The red haze of anger floated before his eyes. He suddenly wanted to rip down every wall of the convent. It had robbed him of Helen. He clenched his fists hard. He wanted to hit someone ! His powerful frame trembled with strange passions. He remembered Rudy's advice : 'One cool thought helps a lot more than ten hasty actions'. He folded the letter and replaced it in the envelope. He lighted a cigarette, and removing his coat, he lay back on the easy chair. He calmed down a lot as he smoked. He gazed absently at the filter-tip of the cigarette : it had turned brown, with the accumulation of nicotine. He ground the butt into the ash tray and rising, he crossed to the window and gazed out at the crowded street.

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"So you wish to break all the vows you have made to your God ?" Helen did not reply, but gazed unseeingly through the window.

"It would be better if you let things be as they are. You say you wrote him a letter telling him the whole thing was off : Well why change now ? If you

reflect calmly, you will see how correct you were in your action, and how foolish you would be if you went back on what you've written!"

"But mother I love him terribly," cried Helen in desperation.

"Do you love him more than God, more than your salvation, more than the sacred vows you've made to your Creator?" Helen covered her face with her hands and turned away. The nun could see that she was sobbing. "Come here my child!" she said slowly. Obediently the other came.

Mother Margaret caught her hands and gently removed them from her face.

"Look at me Helen, and tell me if you have been unhappy once during all these years you have spent here."

The weeping woman raised her beautiful eyes and gazed at the calm face above her. Then she lowered her gaze and replied slowly "Only once; that was eighteen years ago, when I lost Jack—my baby!"

"And don't you think you have led a good holy life for the time you have been here; or do you consider your time wasted?"

"I've tried to be good, but—but—"

"Yes, I know. Now you think you are really in love and you wish to break away from everything. No, don't interrupt me. What you think is love is merely the call of the flesh. You are infatuated. Satan is ever ready to cast choice morsels in the path of Our Lord's faithful ones, will you let the honeyed words of a young boxer who also happens to be a killer, take you away from the straight narrow path? Look at that picture of Our Lord. Can any man

conceive the sufferings, agony and humiliation. He went through in order to free us from bondage? Yes Helen, He, The Son of God, actually took the forms of man and suffered himself to be spat upon and mocked. Will you allow the evil influences of the archenemy to wean you away from the allegiance you owe to Him?" The holy woman paused as Helen gazed at the large picture of the Crucifixion that adorned the east wall of the parlour and then seeing the wavering look in those tear blurred eyes, she smiled in triumph and continued, "Think well my child before you make a decision that you may live to regret. Would you like to have your paradise here on earth, in the arms of a man: a purely temporary and carnal one, that can be uprooted and smashed at any moment by death, disease or mischance; or would you prefer to spend your life in His service—"here she pointed to the picture"—and have an everlasting paradise against which no evil can prevail? Look at me my child. You already have the answer in your heart. You must serve Him above all others. Remember Helen, the easy things in life are not worthwhile. It's the difficult things in life that are worth trying for. You must know how easy it is to follow your own inclinations and whims, but isn't it very difficult to sacrifice everything for truth, and isn't it a glorious spiritual victory to be able to make that sacrifice?"

Mother Margaret stopped speaking and gazed at the girl. Her tears had ceased and her face was pale and drawn, but there was a firm set about her almost bloodless lips, and strange fires burned in her eyes. Slowly the words came from her. "You are right, Mother. I will forget him. I suppose it was just

another evil temptation of the devil. But he is bound to come here, and I must not see him. I am terrified to think of another meeting. I will surely succumb to his persuasions ! Can't you send me away ? Please, only till he leaves the place, and then I will return and take the veil !"

"Yes, I can do that. Come it is twelve o'clock. Pack your valise quickly and you can get the local to Rajabad. You've been there before. I'll give you a letter to Sister Anne and you can stay there till he leaves town !"

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Bob reached the convent at sunset. He vaulted the wall of the cemetery and moved through the citron groves. He could not see Helen anywhere. He drew back into the cool shadows and waited. He wondered what had caused Helen to change her mind. Slowly the minutes passed. Dusk gathered. Bob shrugged his shoulders impatiently and gazed at the grey cloisters. With a determined look he left the garden and headed towards them. He saw a white robed figure. He stopped and raised his soft felt hat.

"Good evening."

"Good evening," replied the nun. She was going over the beads of her rosary.

"May I bother you for a minute?" asked the young pugilist, "My name is Bob Merino, and I would like to speak to a young lady who is here. Her name is Helen Croxley !" "I knew you would come. I am Mother Margaret. I am very sorry, but Helen left the convent today. She told me all about it, and said she did not wish to meet you. She was most definite about it."

"Where has she gone?"

"I'm sorry, but I gave her my word that I would not tell you."

"But—but I love her, I love her terribly. She is all I have, all I've struggled for, ever since I was a boy. Please tell me!"

Mother Margaret shook her head negatively.

"I cannot break my word," she said simply.

"Oh don't be absurd!" urged Bob, "how can you have scruples about such trifles when all my life, all my happiness depends on her?"

"I am sorry. I cannot change!"

"Oh how can you be so heartless? But then I guess you don't know what love is. You've conquered all your passions, and now you bask in the glory of self-imposed chastisement and renunciation. You're not human any more. You want everyone else to be same—With a long face and lips constantly moving in prayers—prayers that are purely mechanical? Can't you see that Helen was made for life, love and sunshine?"

"Young man you are terribly disrespectful, and I am glad now that Helen did not fall in with your wishes and marry you. Besides you are no one to decide what she was intended for; also you are a mere youngster. Now that I look at you more closely I can see that you are scarcely out of your teens!"

Bob's temper was thoroughly aroused, and with an effort he checked his hot reply.

"Well have it your way. I guess I've wasted my time. I'm sorry for having been so rude. I was all worked up. Good night!" and turning away abruptly, he left the holy woman.

Fierce hate for all religions and all things holy burnt in Bob's heart as he strode gloomily along. What a stupid thing religion is with its vows of celibacy. How insane he thought to restrain from the most natural and highest form of pleasure that man is endowed with, in order to reach the entirely fanciful and barren satisfaction that priests and nuns attain. After all, if God intended a lovely creature like Helen for that end, then he should have created a sexless world! Next he found himself wondering where Helen had hidden herself. He stopped dead as his thoughts took this turn. Perhaps she had not left the convent at all. Perhaps she had told Mother Margaret to deceive him while she hid within the cloisters! He extracted his cigarette case and lit a cigarette while he considered this new possibility. He glanced at his watch. Seven fifteen..Swiftly he made his way back to the distant convent.

He moved silently through the citron garden. The chapel bells pealed out the silvery melody of the "Angelus". It fell unheeded on Bob's ears. With the swiftness of a cat, the boxer reached the chapel, and concealing himself in the deep shadow of one of the buttresses he gazed intently through the tiny ornamental window. He could see Mother Margaret, and a score of other nuns, but of Helen there was no sign. Leaving the shadow of the chapel, Bob regained the shelter and concealment of the garden just as the nuns left the chapel. With bitter feelings in his heart he headed for the dusty road, and cursed all the convents and monasteries in the whole world. What hypocrisy he thought, to shatter—in the name of religion—a deep true love, a natural love, a love that God intended him to enjoy!

He suddenly started as an owl hooted eerily from the bare branches of a stunted tree. He thought the hooting had a note of derisive mockery in it. Stooping down he picked up a stone and hurled it with savage force at the ill-omened bird. It missed the owl by inches. The startled bird fluttered away into the darkness. He halted his steps on the maidan and sitting on the broken down culvert he gazed at the distant road.

Thoughts of Helen came strongly to him as he gazed at the distant blur of the convent walls. He suddenly, and for no particular reason found himself recalling the lines written by Tennyson :—

“—I saw wherever light illumineth
Beauty and anguish walking hand in hand
The downward path to death.”

He felt a strange desire to write down his thoughts as beautifully as the poet. Mechanically he fumbled in his pocket and fished out a small note book and pencil.

Silvery moon-light replaced the dim half-light of the countryside before Bob Merino finally stopped writing. Rising he stretched out his tired limbs and continued his interrupted progress towards the distant lights of the town.

Once within his rooms, he tried to think out a solution to the strange tangle his love affair had taken. Finally he decided to write to Helen. The letter would be re-addressed by Mother Margaret and would reach her . . . In the convent at Rajabad, Helen Croxley sat alone in her tiny room and regarded the world through the close-set bars of the window. Now that she had finally escaped the attentions of Bob

Merino, she found that instead of a deep seated satisfaction, she felt a strange emptiness in her heart. Her life felt suddenly and absolutely barren. The fresh smell of flowers from the garden below was wafted up to her nostrils. It reminded her strongly of the evening Bob had met her in the citron garden. Poor dear Bob She wondered what he was doing at that very moment She saw the khaki clad postman slowly approach the distant gates. It was as she watched him depart, after delivering the mail, that a knock on the door made her turn. Mechanically she accepted the letter from Sister Anne and thanking her she shut the door. She glanced at the envelope and her eyes went wide. The writing was Bob's!

With trembling fingers she opened the cover and unfolded the letter.

"Helen my own -" it ran "why have you done this to me? You know that you mean all the world to me and that all that I have done was for you, and yet you have deserted me and for what? I suppose you will say: 'for God'.

My darling can't you see that you are doing wrong? Isn't plain to you that the millions of people all the world over who are married still serve God, and perhaps better than those who are not! After all He intended us to be happy and to take partners whom we really love, and with their help lead good clean lives. Yes, we would be serving him by doing merely this. Can't you see that every good action and noble aspiration is a prayer. Surely you do not think it necessary to be in a convent to pray properly: or do you? I do not know where you've hidden yourself. I was unable to elicit any useful

information from the nun in charge over here. I wandered back through the cemetery, and sat on the broken culvert in the field. I sat there till moonrise and thought of you. I wrote down all my thoughts. I know they are not beautifully written, but your desertion of me inspired them so I reproduce them for you. Here they are—

The dying daylight drags towards the west,
Where cloud and sky, kiss hill and
meadowland,

In last embrace of gold and purple dressed,
Ere Night puts forth her hand.

* * *

In gloomy solitude I sit and dream,
As half forgotten memories arise,
Like fantasies, they shudder, swoon and
seem

To sink before my eyes!

* * *

Now Day has swept away beyond the west,
And eerie Blackness holds unhallowed reign,
And all my fancy, all my heart's oppressed,
With longings strange and vain.

* * *

The flitting shadows of the dark clad night,
The flitting bats that swoop and sweep away,
While ghostly squeaking marks their leathery
flight,

Bring thoughts of Death—Decay.

* * *

Ah life is but another weary day,
That starts with rosy fingers like the dawn,

That draws itself out, and then dies away,
As Death creeps slowly on.

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Labour is useless, toil seems but to win,
A bitter cup, with no joy, no reward,
For all life runs into oblivion,
Beneath the cold hard sod.

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Death is the end of life, the end of all
This dreaming, scheming, and the works
man's wrought,
All things will be enveloped in that pall,
Great deeds will come to naught.

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The only thing that lives and always will,
In spite of crumbling ruin and deceit,
And beautiful in triumph flourish still,
Is love—sublime, and sweet !

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My fancy wandered on; the east waxed
bright,
The glancing yellow moon beams streaked
aloft,
And beautiful flashed forth the Queen of
Night,
Her smile serene and soft.

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Thro' my dream misted eyes I saw again,
A lily figure walking in the land

Of waking dreams, I started up in pain,
And tried to grasp your hand.

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'My Helen, fairest flower of Paradise—
With form so graceful and with lips so
sweet—
With red gold locks, and with bewitching
eyes—
My heart is at your feet !'

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'The mellow music of your voice divine,
The truth that shines within your violet
eyes,
The gentle touch of your fair hand on mine,
These all my life I'll prize.'

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'The mem'ry of your lovely face will haunt,
The mem'ry of your half shy kiss is dear,
But Love, 'tis more than memory I want :
I want you always near !'

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You smiled, and looked into the swirling
grey,
Your smile was sweet : as is a fond caress,
And then you wavered, faded, died away—
To airy nothingness !

Yes that's exactly how I feel. I think every-
thing in life hinges on Love. Without love nothing
is worth-while. Surely a love as deep and as true
as mine must realise its object. I know I will meet
you again and I know it will be soon. I love you.

Nothing else matters. I can't write anything more. I won't try and tell you how I am feeling now. That would be superfluous! I only hope this letter reaches you wherever you are. Adieu, till I find you, or we chance to meet.

Your for ever Bob."

Slowly the letter fell from Helen's nerveless fingers. She felt a great sorrow sweep her lonely heart. She found herself wondering if she had really done right in casting aside the love—the true fervent love of a fellow creature in order to reach a goal of self-satisfaction attained by abstinence from all the most natural functions that her body and mind were fashioned for! Was the real happiness of living to be got away from life, or from life itself? She stooped down and picked up the letter. For a second time she went over the closely written lines. Her mind was a turmoil of conflicting emotions. She suddenly realised that she was giving way to her thoughts and emotions. She remembered Mother Margaret's words—"What you think is love, is merely the call of the flesh."

Well, why not answer that call when she was of the flesh. Why did God give her a body and place her in a world where all was carnal. Why did God make physical pleasure the highest and the most pleasing to man. Did God expect her to turn her back on all things fleshly? He could not.... It would be the same if the Almighty expected the ferocious tiger to subdue its instincts and live amicably with the fawn!

With an effort Helen checked her mental aberrations as she realised that she was not thinking the way she had pledged herself to think! Folding

the letter she replaced it in its cover and gazed through the window once more.

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Bob Merino's turn to Callapore was widely publicised, and was the signal for Helen to return to Kariapur. She fondly imagined that she would forget everything in the peaceful surroundings of the convent, but little did she realise that the fires which had been lighted in her heart by Bob's caresses were merely smouldering !

XII

THE ELOPEMENT

"Listen Bob, you should pay more attention to your training. It's not enough to become champion. It's to remain there that will be the real test. You're only a youngster and can well afford to hold the championship for another ten years, but not if you gonna skulk training and drink so heavily!"

Having spoken thus, Spider Kelly thrust his hands into his pockets and regarded the hunched figure of Bob Merino.

The young boxer did not answer. He merely reached out for the bottle of whisky before him. Regardless of Spider's advice, he poured himself a stiff tot and gulped it down neat.

Shuffling his feet uneasily Spider gazed in despair at Bob.

"I am sure you would not do this if Rudy were alive!"

"May be," was the non-committal reply in a voice made thick and heavy by drink.

For a few moments Bob smoked in morose silence before dropping the butt in the ash tray. Suddenly, he shook himself and stared into the old pugilist's wrinkled and scarred face.

"Sit down Spider," he said in a voice that was almost a command. Kelly smiled sourly and deposited himself in a chair.

"Look Spider, were you ever in love?" he asked as he offered the other a cigarette. Spider accepted it, and striking a match, held it to Bob's cigarette before lighting his own.

Thoughtfully Spider drew at his cigarette and slowly blew out a stream of smoke before replying to Bob's question.

"So that's the trouble, is it? I almost guessed it before you spoke. Some other guy horned in on you?"

"No, nothing so simple!"

"Then what's it?"

"She wants to go become a nun or something. I love her terribly. She is too damned lovely to be a nun. God, I must see her before she goes and does it!"

"That's simple enough. Why don't you go and see her?"

"Look, if it was so easy I would have, but she has been fool enough to tell the Reverend Mother all about it, and now they've hidden her up in some God-forsaken hole! I wish I knew where."

For a while the two sat in silence. At last Bob spoke.

"Hell, Spider what a fool I am. She must have returned to Kariapur after I left. I'm going back. I must see her before she goes through with it, and takes the veil!"

He took a deep pull at his cigarette and continued, "Can you get a fast car anywhere here? I don't care what it costs."

"I suppose I can and must," replied Spider sourly.

"Are you sure you must do this: I mean will it be any good?"

"Come Spider, don't ask such questions. They are superfluous. Go along and fix this car business. I must go through with it. I must."

"Very well Bob, and don't touch that bottle any more or you will be drunk by the time I return, and you will not be able to travel!"

Spider Kelly lit another cigarette and rose from his chair.

"O. K. Bob keep your chin up and if you want any advice, go have a pick-me-up at Martins. I'll be back in half an hour!"

Bob watched Kelly depart, and then he rose from the chair he had been occupying. He stuck his soft felt on his head and left his rooms. He stood on the pavement and signalled to a taxi. A few minutes later he alighted outside Martins. Entering, he sat at his usual table and waited for the pick-me-up.....

He downed the stuff and sat back in his chair waiting patiently for Spider to arrive. True to his word Kelly arrived within half an hour. Bob paid the waiter and followed Kelly out.

"Well, we are on our way!" grinned Spider as the car slowly moved down the street, gradually gathering speed. Bob opened the window and sat back. He was feeling much better. The reviver aided by the rushing air was sweeping away the heavy mists from his brain. New confidence surged through him. To hell with everything....He wanted Helen and he would get her, even if he had to take the convent apart with his bare hands. The car was out on the open road, and the driver accelerated. Bob grinned as he observed one of the fellow's cars was cauliflower. An old prize fighter: One of Spider's close associates! Spider saw his look.

"Nearly hit championship heights," he confided out of the corner of his mouth, "Dames and grog

did for him!" Bob caught the implied hint but merely laughed. He felt supremely happy....He wanted to sing. He slapped the sour faced Kelly on his back.

"My God Spider, you should be in that bloody convent with that bunch of long faced nuns. You are being wasted out here!"

Spider shrugged his stinging shoulder and lit up a cigarette.

"You young fool, don't hit me so hard," he grunted, "or you will be bloody well crippling me. See?"

Onward sped the car, every second bringing the rugged trio nearer to Kariapur....

It was at sunset that they sped down the long dusty road running alongside the convent.

"O. K. That's all," said Bob. The car came to a stop.

"Park her in the bushes, and wait till I return," said the young pugilist as he alighted.

"How long will you be?" queried Kelly.

"Can't say," replied Bob as he headed across the fields without a backward glance.

Bob reached the cemetery and stepped carefully along the paths between the graves. He reached the wall. He saw the 'madonna' ghostly and white against the dark black rocks of the grotto. He glanced at the grave of Jack Wells. Then was a large bouquet of fresh flowers on the plain marble slab. She had returned! Bob felt his heart beat with the force of a trip-hammer. In a few seconds he would see her. He vaulted the low wall of the cemetery and approached the garden.

The strong scent of citrons reached his nostrils. With the stealth of a cat, he moved through the garden. He had no desire to encounter any of the nuns, or renew his short acquaintance with Mother Margaret! He knew Helen would be there: she was. He saw her standing at the end of the long avenue of citron trees: clearly silhouetted against the purpling west. He moved close up to her. She turned and saw him. She stood in indecision.

"Bob!" she exclaimed in a half-choked voice, "why did you come?" she stepped back and tried to turn away, but his eyes held her.

The next moment he reached her in a few strides, and swept her into his arms, and covered her lips, her cheeks, her hair and her eyes with scorching kisses....

All Helen's resistance, her good intentions, and her secret vows—made in the dim candle light of the little chapel—were swept away like straws in the grip of a roaring mountain torrent, that tears everything down in its headlong course.....The spirit was willing: the woman was flesh!.....Slowly she relaxed in his strong arms. He gazed at the misty violet eyes, the half parted red lips and pearly white teeth.

He pressed his mouth down on hers. He felt her lips part beneath his. He kissed her again and again as she lay swooning in his arms.

"Why did you run away from me Helen?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"Bob my own, I tried to forget you, but it's useless. It's best to face the truth. If loving you means damnation for my soul: even then it doesn't matter....Darling....I love you so terribly that it

pains me! . . . "Come away with me Helen. To-night. Now!"

"To-night! Yes Bob, I have to face facts. My life has been tied to yours ever since we met five years ago. I'll come Bob, only . . . only I cannot face Mother Margaret and tell her all. I'll have to come away quietly."

"When Darling?"

"At midnight Bob. I'll be here waiting for you. Kiss me again dearest!"

The young pugilist needed no second bidding. He swept the beautiful woman into his arms and crushed her to him. Their souls seemed to be fused together in the ecstasy of that moment. Time seemed to stand still as the lovers tasted the fragrance of each others lips and their breath mingled. The 'angelus' pealed out her beautiful notes on the still evening air. For once Helen did not cross herself and stand in silent prayer . . . She clung tightly to Bob . . . Oblivious of the world . . . Oblivious of time . . . Oblivious of God!

"Au revoir Darling!" she whispered as she kissed him again and moved away, "twelve o'clock tonight!" . . . Helen felt almost guilty as she entered her room that night. She paced about nervously for a full fifteen minutes, before sitting down in a chair. She rose again and looked at her face in the small mirror. She was beautiful, young and healthy: that was obvious. Why not snatch whatever happiness was offered to her. Why let a past tragedy darken her whole life?

She put down the mirror and started packing a valise. She went about it methodically. In a few minutes she completed this, and sitting at the writing

table, she started writing "Dear Mother Margaret," she wrote. I am going away. I am eloping tonight with the man I love. I was never made for a convent. I tried hard to be good, but my nature would not allow me. Perhaps if my child were not stolen I might have been different. Any way this is no time for regrets. It's better I do this now, rather than do it later, after having taken the veil, perhaps. You and all the other nuns have been most kind and good to me. I feel I did not deserve it. I have broken my promise to you and to God, but I am not wrong in breaking it. I was wrong in giving it. I know I will find happiness with Bob. He is a grand chap. At times he almost reminds me of Jack. Poor Jack. I don't suppose he is bothered very much now, about what I do or whom I love: after all he does not belong to this world any longer. I do not want to justify my action. What is wrong to you is not wrong to me. I am not worried at what I have done. In this strange world of ours each individual lives in another little world of his or her own. I think the true joy of living comes if one lives perfectly in that little world of one's own without allowing outside influences to bias or oppress one. I have thought it well over and have decided that the true joy of life verges on a balance between love and reason. The real joy and harmony of life do not come from penance and self-chastisement.... They come from love. For eighteen years I've tried to love your God, but have been guilty of hypocrisy. I prefer to love something vital, strong and beautiful. I've found it at last. From now on I am not going to say another prayer, because I think most prayers are merely lip service. Real prayers must be just

good noble impulses and thoughts. I do not think I will have any ugly thoughts in the world Bob and I have planned, so my life should be better than what it has been upto now!

I am sure we were not made to endure misery and heartbreaks. It is always possible to make a golden world of our own if we only try. Good-bye Mother Margaret! You may do what you wish with all the things I have left behind. In the drawer of my writing table you will find a cheque for a certain sum of money. It is exactly half of all I have in the world. Please take it, and use it as you think fit. I am taking Towser with me, because I know he will not be happy without me: I hope you don't mind after all he is only a pup. I wish you and all the others happiness. Good-bye!....Helen.

Helen sealed the letter and stood it up against the pen rack. She switched the light off and left the room. Making her way to the refectory, she ate her supper in silence.

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Helen gazed at the little clock on her writing table. Ten minutes to twelve. She rose from the chair, and picked up her valise. She switched off the light and silently she left the room. The silence was heavy. So still was the sleeping convent that she could almost hear the thudding of her own heart. Carefully, step by step she negotiated the wooden staircase: until at last she reached the foot of the stairs. The valise was heavy and her arm ached. She set it down and rested a few minutes before she tiptoed her way through the dark corridor. The cold night air greeted her as she emerged into the

open yard. She gave a low whistle. The fluffy-haired Towser scampered across the yard and licked her hands. She picked up the valise and followed by the dog she headed for the garden. The faint crunching of her shoes on the gravel path seemed to be magnified a hundred-fold. Her heart beating wildly, she almost expected to see the white robed figure of Mother Margaret appear on the verandah at any moment! However nothing happened, and she gained the sanctuary of the garden unobserved. As she reached the end of the citron scented avenue, she turned and waved a wordless goodbye to the convent that she had grown to love.

Yes, it was farewell to that peaceful beautiful place. Farewell to the grey cloisters where the doves cooed at noon and moss grew thick and green, at the base of the walls. Farewell to the kind simple nuns who had treated her so kindly. Farewell to the little incense perfumed chapel which seemed to radiate a strange calm holiness when illumined by the flickering candles at dusk. Yes, it was farewell to all that! A strange feeling rose somewhere within her. It was as though her heart strings were tightening. Her breath came in deep sighs and she felt tears well in her eyes. She heard a soft footstep. Towser growled. She cautioned the dog to silence and looked up to see the dimly outlined figure of Bob Merino. Taking the suit case from her, Bob helped her over the wall. Towser jumped over and followed them through the silent cemetery. On the road, parked in the shadows was the car. Bob handed the heavy valise to Spider who dumped it on the floor of the car. Helen climbed in and holding on to Towser's collar, seated herself. Bob sat beside her.

"Where to Champ?" asked the cauliflower eared one, as he declutched and manipulated the gears with an easy familiarity.

"Back to the Magnolia," said Bob shortly. Outside the portals of the hotel, Bob gripped Kelly's hand firmly. The veteran could see the gratitude in his eyes.

"I'll be in Callapore in a few days, Spider," he said softly.

"Cheerio Mick," he called to the driver.

"Adios Champ!" said Mick as he lit a cigarette and slammed the door of the automobile.

Linking his arm in Helen's, Bob picked up the valise and entered the hotel....The next morning they were married.

XIII

BUBBLE HAPPINESS ?

When Helen and Bob Merino stepped out of the Magistrate's office, as a married couple, the drab city of Kariapur seemed a glorious Eden to her. At last, she fondly imagined, she had found true happiness. At last she could forget the ugly spectre of the past. She seemed to be walking on air as she held the tough sun bronzed fingers of Bob. He held her hand tightly, as though he were frightened of losing her.

"Are you happy Darling ?" he asked, giving her delicate fingers a slight squeeze.

"Bob dearest, I'm so happy that it almost hurts !" she replied in a low voice, "Here's the taxi. Let's get away quickly. You know I am feeling like a long long ride. I want to feel the air rushing against me, and I want to lie back in your arms and dream . . . dream of happiness and life !"

Bob helped her in, and slammed the door shut. For a while they sat in silence, her head resting on his shoulder. She could feel his breath on her hair. At last she spoke. "Bob," she whispered, "If I grow old soon, will you stop loving me ?"

Bob caressed her red hair, and drew her closer to himself. He pressed his lips gently on hers. "Helen, Helen," he said quietly, "how can you even think such things ? I am yours for ever and ever. Beauty is merely superficial. Your heart is young, and it can never grow old. Your real beauty can never die. To me you will always be as lovely as when I saw you from the swaying branches of the orange tree in the convent garden !"

He saw her blush and turn her face away.

"Helen you're blushing. Why?"

"Bob you just mentioned the orange garden. The thought that I am now married to the same urchin whom I checked for robbing five years ago, makes me feel awkward! She paused and looked straight into his eyes, and continued, but, what an urchin. He started professional fighting at the tender age of sixteen and at twenty-one wears the heavy weight crown of the East!

Bob grinned and looked away. He wondered what Helen would say if she knew that his real age was only eighteen. He decided not to say anything. It might only upset her to know there was a bigger difference in their ages than she imagined.

He spoke, "Darling, where shall we go?"

Helen was thoughtful for a while. At last she replied. "Tell the chauffeur to drive to eighteen Napier Road. My house is there, I haven't lived in it for years. It's been occupied by tenants, but for the last few months it's lain vacant. My car is lying there as well. If it's in working order, we will use it!"

When they neared the Hotel Magnolia, she spoke again. "Bob, why not stop here, and pick up all our stuff, and then go?"

"Good idea, Helen!" grinned Bob, and he spoke to the chauffeur.

The car stopped outside the Magnolia. "Wait in the taxi Helen, I'll be back in a minute," he told her as he left her side, and entered the hotel. A short while later he appeared, followed by the uniformed porter who carried their baggage.

The taxi rolled to a stop before eighteen Napier Road, and Helen and Bob climbed out. Abdul who was chewing betel, and idly regarding the world in general, from the shadow of the outhouse, saw and recognised Helen. He hurried forward to help with the luggage. His seamed brown face crinkled into a thousand lines of joy, as he salaamed his mistress.

"Helen Missy has returned after a long time!" he said as he shouldered the baggage with astonishing ease.

"Yes, Abdul and I am never going away again!" she smiled at him.

Abdul glanced at Bob and moved away calling down the blessings of Allah on his beautiful mistress and the lucky young Sahib whom she was with.

By noon, Helen and Bob assisted by Abdul and the chokra, had cleaned, dusted and tidied the little bungalow. She watched Bob unpack his valise. With great care he transferred his suits into the chest o'drawers. At the bottom of the valise lay a tiny pistol.

"Darling! who are you going to shoot?" asked Helen, her eye brows arching coyly.

"I'll shoot the first guy who makes eyes at you, you lovely little wretch!" grinned Bob. Then he turned serious.

"I have always carried this around. I first got a licence for it when a gang of unsportsmanlike thugs got after me in Batavia, where I pasted daylight out of their champ! I winged one of them and that stopped their cowardly tricks. See you load it this way," he said sliding the bottom of the butt away, and slipping a clip of ammunition into the hollow

grip. He closed the butt and indicated a tiny lever, "You push that forward, it's the safety catch: then you've just got to keep compressing and releasing the trigger, and you can pump out round after round of flaming death, as the cowboy books say!" He applied the safety catch and dropped the pistol into the open drawer. He carried the empty leather valise to one of the smaller rooms and returned.

"And now Helen, you can give me the keys to the garage, please. I'll have that car of yours working in no time," he smiled as he stuck a cigarette between his lips, and lighted it.

"Here you are Bob," she said holding the keys to him. He took them and went out. She followed him to the door, and leaning against the door post, watched him as he got the garage open and entered. Singing in a low voice, she turned back into the house, and entered the hall. In the corner, placed neatly on an ornamental table was a dress suit. It was torn and stained brown in places.

Tom Croxley's dress suit . . . !

The one he was wearing when the accident took place. A host of ugly memories and confusing thoughts rushed before her. Somewhere, in the recesses of her brain, the strange smell of death—a nauseating memory of the odour of gun-powder and human blood seemed to materialise, and actually assail her nostrils. She looked fearfully over her shoulder, half expecting to see the sneering face of Tom Croxley. She swayed slightly and caught the book case for support.

"Abdul!" she shouted in a half strangled voice, "come here quickly."

The faithful old retainer hurried into the room as quickly as he could.

"Take this away at once and destroy it. Never let me see it again. Burn it. Quickly!"

Obediently Abdul removed the dress suit, and departed. With its removal, Helen's fears dissipated, and the strange gloominess that hung around the hall seemed to disappear. A short while later, Abdul returned. "It is done Missy Helen. The accursed thing has been burnt in the khud beyond the nallah. I did it with my own hands, and scattered the ash to the winds!"

"Thanks Abdul," said Helen shortly as she sat down in a chair and picked up a magazine.

Early that evening, Bob had the car going, and slipping behind the wheel, Helen drove out towards the distant scrubland that lay north of Kariapur. Suddenly she brought the car to a standstill.

"Bob, it was here that I met Jack," she said softly. Somehow I feel that his spirit must linger here, as we visited this place together very often after our first meeting. I know it's foolish of me to say such a thing, but if his spirit does linger here, I want him to see me with you—happy. You know he always liked me to smile. I am sure his spirit will be at rest if he knows I have at last found joy!" Bob caught her hand and gazed at the star spangled blue of the heavens. She said, "Darling it must be wonderful after death; to fly with the speed of thought from one star to another: to never know want, pain, or unhappiness!"

Bob grinned at the twinkling stars. "Perhaps Helen, but I prefer to be alive and face want, pain,

and unhappiness rather than be snuffed out and go to a place I have no idea of !”

“Come, the moon is rising. Let us get back to town. You drive,” said Helen, as they retraced their steps towards the car. On reaching the bungalow, Bob parked the car, and hand in hand they entered the hall. Switching the light on, they moved into the dining room.

“Abdul must have left our supper in the hot case,” said Helen, crossing the room and opening it. “Yes here we are !”

Bob finished first and sat back smoking. When Helen had done, she leaned her elbows on the table, and regarded him with a smile. “Let’s go out for a spot of air,” he told her. Together they strolled out into the little garden. The night was turning chill when they decided to return indoors.

Bob tossed his half-smoked cigarette away, and swept her up in his arms. He covered her with kisses. He strode back towards the fairly illuminated house : . . . Towser followed, his tail wagging.

He entered the bed room. It was lighted by the single all night bulb of frosted glass that enclosed a filament which merely glowed like an ember. She slid from his arms and vanished behind the screen. In a minute she appeared in a dark blue gown. Bob could see that she had nothing on beneath it. He gulped slightly, and turned away. Helen smiled.

“Bob, aren’t you coming to bed ?” she asked, with soft invitation in her tone.

The pugilist turned and looked at her. She seemed to be painted with the dull rosy hue of the night light in a strange ethereal way. He could see the deep shadows and swelling lines of her body

stand out with amazing clarity beneath the delicate blue gown. Somehow she seemed to fit in with his half-formed conception of what an angel must be. Only the wings were missing. He found himself trembling slightly. He turned away again.

"Helen, you seem so heavenly, delicate: so—so wonderful I feel frightened to—to do anything—!"

She sat on the edge of the bed.

"Bob, come here!" she whispered.

Slowly he came, half in a dream. She drew his face down, and kissed him. Her words, her action, her touch, seemed to dissipate the young boxer's strange fears. Slowly his arms went about her; while her eyes seemed to look into the very depths of his soul....

Outside silence reigned supreme, except for the occasional cry of a night bird....

The faint purple of morning coloured the eastern skies and streaked in over the window blinds. Helen opened her eyes, and smothered a yawn with her dainty hand. She glanced at Bob. He was fast asleep. Silently she left his side, and entered the bath-room. She stood under the cold spray, while she brushed her teeth. She stepped out from under the stinging spray and soaped herself. She played with the thick fragrant lather. Idly she picked up the hollow steel handle of Bob's safety razor and dipped one end in the soapy water at the bottom of the soap dish. She put the other end to her lips and blew gently. Larger and larger grew the bubble: like a huge ball of crystal. A thin beam of sunshine that had sneaked in through the cracked window, painted it to glorious tints. With a slight motion of her hand she detached the bubble and watched it sail across

the room: up towards the ceiling. It touched the ceiling, hung there for an infinitesimal second and then burst to nothingness. She replaced the hollow handle, and stepped under the spray. After towel-ling herself dry and dressing, she combed back her thick red hair, and bound it with a blue ribbon. She looked at herself in the mirror. The years had made no difference. She could have passed off as a girl: so youthful was her appearance. She entered the bed room and opened the top drawer to get Bob's matches. She wanted to light the stove and prepare some tea, as the electric heater was out of order. She saw the pistol, but could see no matches. She turned away, and found herself regarding her husband's naked torso. He lay on his left side, with his arm flung out across the bed. She saw the deep chest rise and fall with a steady regularity. She saw the handsome neck and powerful shoulders. The deep muscles of his arms, relaxed in rest, still stood, out in contour. His abdomen sloped down sharply in a series of corrugations to a powerful yet slender waistline. Truly a collosus of physical strength: built as perfectly as any gladiator of old. He moved his right leg slightly, as he stirred in sleep. The quilt fell away, and her gaze went to his naked right thigh. She started back as her eyes rested on a livid mark....a birth mark. It had the perfect shape of a heart. High up near the groin it formed a startling contrast with the whiteness of his skin. An icy hand clutched her heart. Her eyes went wide with horror and doubt, and a strange emptiness occurred somewhere within her. She staggered back against the chest of drawers. She held on to the open drawer for support. Her eyes fell on the

pistol. A footstep sounded outside, and the door creaked. She whirled around sharply. She found herself staring into an evil pair of light blue eyes. For a moment the thick beard deceived her, and then she recognised Tom Croxley. She felt her head whirling. Croxley was speaking. He was telling her what she had already discovered. His face was horrid, malignant, foul.

"Yes, I stole that bastard away from you," he was saying, "I intended quite a different fate for him: however things turned out much better than I imagined. You've actually married him and slept with him. You know...."

Helen's self-control was amazing.

"Shut up, you loathsome thing," she hissed. "He must never discover the truth!" With a swift movement, she turned and snatched up the pistol. She thumbed the safety catch away. Her hand came forward with the weapon levelled. Croxley saw the icy fires in her eyes. He cringed away, raising his hand protectingly.

"Don't Helen, don't. I'll keep your secret for ever!" he whimpered as that deadly looking bore was trained on him. Helen felt a strange new strength surge through her. She laughed in a low contemptuous tone. The icy cold whisper of her voice reached Croxley.

"You absolute, utter, despicable mongrel. You are a class by yourself: I doubt if any others like you exist in this world. It's wonderful to see you cringe," she moved closer to him. She did not want to miss. "I will shoot you where it hurts most: in your stomach! You've made others suffer, now it's your turn. You've done enough damage

and evil in this world. You'll never do any more!" Holding the weapon steady, she moved nearer, and with a hard smile at the cringing beast before her, she compressed the trigger. A sharp roar shattered the morning quiet, and as Bob leaped into alert wakefulness, she turned the muzzle to her own bosom. . . . The pistol roared once more.

Bob stood there barefooted, naked, bewildered and horrified. On the ground lay Berkeley, the tyrant of his childhood. He had his hands pressed to his belly, and was breathing wheezily. He looked up at Bob with incredible evil in his close set eyes.

"You dog," he croaked, "she is your mother. Your father was Jack Wells. I am Tom Croxley!"

Fury broke loose in Bob. With a catlike leap he was on the dying man. His giant fist thudded again and again on the bearded face and skull, till the wretch's brains trickled out on the faded carpet. There was blood on his knee, where it had ground into Croxley's abdomen.

He dropped the obscene pulp, and bent over Helen. She opened her eyes. They were bright violet. Blood was oozing from her lips.

"Bob, I'm dying. Kiss me darling. Hold me tight, and I won't be frightened!"

Bob Merino pressed his lips to hers. He could taste the strange saline of blood mingled with her fragrance. He wanted to speak but could not. A lump rose in his throat. She fell back in his arms, and gazed at his handsome face and moist eyes. Her eyelids fluttered and drooped. . . . Suddenly she was in the bath room, blowing a soap bubble. The bubble grew to huge proportions. . . . A magnificent sphere of roseate hues. She clambered up and sat

on top of it. Bob clambered up after her and sat by her side. Slowly the bubble rose. Slowly it rose towards the ceiling. Higher and Higher. It floated towards the wall. The spray, the soap dish, the tub and the towel rack seemed to be miles below. Slowly the bubble approached the wall. It touched and vanished in a small spray of gold drops. She and Bob, locked in each others arms were falling. Falling towards the tessellated floor that rushed up to meet them. She hit the floor and a sharp pain shot through her bosom....She opened her eyes. She realised that she had been through the momentary delirium that sometimes precedes death. She saw Bob bending over her. She nestled closer in his arms and whispered, "Good-bye Darling, I am going. Come to me soon! Good-bye Bob....It's all golden over there....The sun is shining so bright....I am not afraid.....Bob! Bob!" She shuddered and relaxed in the pugilist's limp arms. The spark of life had left her. Gently he disengaged the pistol from her lifeless fingers and laid her on the bed. He stood at the foot of the bed and gazed at her calm feature and marble white limbs. How long he stood there and gazed at her, he never knew. A footstep made him look up. The police!....Bob dressed and went with them.

* • *

During the days that followed, Bob made bigger headline news than he had ever made in fistic history! He remained silent all through the trial, and heard the sentence of death pronounced on him with a cold indifference. He refused to appeal. In the condemned cell he played patience the whole day.

After a time even this became boring. There were still fourteen days of life left for him. He accepted the whole thing with a stoical resignation. The only thing that galled him was the thought of being strung up like any common felon, for a crime that he had not committed. To have spoken in defence would mean shattering the secret that Helen and Croxley had died with. No....Better the gallows than that!

XIV

ESCAPE

It was late the next evening that Spider Kelly was admitted to his cell. He stood silent for a full minute, regarding Bob before he spoke.

"My God, Bob, why did you have to go and do such a thing? And that too after reaching the top and whipping the champion ship away?"

"I never did it Spider," replied Bob indifferently as he smoked a cigarette.

"What?"

Look into my eyes Spider, I have nothing to gain by lying. Have you ever known me to lie?"

"Then why did you remain silent all through the trial. Why didn't you defend yourself?"

"Spider, there are certain things in life that come before any other consideration: even before life itself! They are love, honour and loyalty. I am sorry I cannot explain the matter further, but I don't mind facing death if that's the reward for my silence!"

"I know now that you are speaking the truth. If you—" here he lowered his voice—"were given a chance to escape and leave the country, would you take it?"

The desire to live surged through Bob. His reply was scarcely audible, but Kelly saw his lips frame the single word "yes"! The veteran gazed at Bob and then at the high barred window.

"No one has ever broken out of here. They are bloody careless. I have already slipped something into your pocket. Don't look now. A fast car will

be at the cross roads at the stroke of ten, and will wait for you till dawn!"

Spider offered Bob a cigarette, which he lighted from the butt of his previous one. After conversing casually for a few minutes, Spider Kelly left. Bob ate his evening meal without bothering to see what Spider had slipped into his pocket....It was after the lights were turned out, that he started working on the bars. He continually spat on the blade to keep it cool. He was glad that the prisoner in the next cell had asthma. The continuous coughing helped to drown the faint rasp of the hack saw blade. He had to stop often, and his face was bathed in sweat, before he finally cut through two of the bars. He had cut them through the top ends.

Grasping one of them, he heaved mightily inwards. He felt it give way. He bore downwards with all his strength and weight, until it would come no further. He did the same with the other bar.

He clambered through the gap, and dropped lightly to the ground. He gazed at the distant gates. A sentry was standing there. Immobile, statue like. Slowly Bob moved forward, his chest and belly hugging the earth. Slowly, like a stalking panther....Slowly the distance diminished. He was only a few paces away. The fellow's back was towards him. Bob rose cautiously to a crouch, and then he charged. Never in all his life had Bob struck such a blow. It had every ounce of his weight and strength added to which was the momentum of his rush. It landed on the base of the sentry's skull. Like lightning, Bob caught him as he crumbled, and eased him to the ground. He then climbed over the darkest part of the spiked iron gates, and fled

towards the distant cross roads. Spider Kelly was there.

"Good Boy!" he grinned as he helped Bob in and pulled the door shut. The engine purred softly and the car leaped to life.... The driver had a cauliflower ear.

"Sit tight champ," grinned Mick over his shoulder. This bloody machine is going for one helluva run, and can she run! "Thanks Mick!" smiled Bob gratefully. He lit a cigarette that Spider offered him, and flicked the match out of the window. He inhaled deeply, and sat back.

The roads were clear, and the powerful car literally ate distance. Bob heard the roaring of the night express. They were running alongside it now. Mick laughed like a maniac, and jammed his foot down on the accelerator. The car surged forward with a sudden rush. The express seemed to stand still, as the car hummed by. The terrific speed with which they spun along the night roads—under the expert touch of the cauliflower eared one—made Bob's hair tingle and sent the blood coursing faster through his veins.

They arrived in Callapore in the small hours of the morning. Bob followed Kelly into his rooms. He was feeling stiff and cold. Spider saw him shiver slightly, and stretch his limbs. He drew a flask out of his pocket and handed it to Bob. It was brandy. Bob took a few gulps of the stuff. It burnt his throat, and seemed to infuse new strength and warmth into his body. He felt worlds better.

"And now what?" he asked as he handed the flask back to Kelly.

"You'd be surprised!" grinned Spider. He put the flask to his lips, and tilted his head back. The young pugilist could see his adam's apple bob up and down as he drained the contents.

"Pick up that suit case, and come along," ordered Kelly. Bob obeyed him. The car was still waiting outside.

"O. K. Hop in," said the old fighter, as he opened the door. "Right Mick, you know where?"

Mick grunted in reply, and the car jerked to life. They sped along the broad roads. Bob gazed out of the window and watched their progress. A look of enlightenment came over his face. They were heading for the dock area. The car stopped at the dock entrance, and Bob and his companion got out.

Spider led Bob to where a battered old tramp floated sluggishly. They crossed the gang plank.

"She sails in a few hours," grinned Kelly as lighted a cigarette and offered Bob one.

"Where does she go?" asked Bob.

"Liverpool. But don't worry, he will drop you at any port on the way. Most likely Marseilles!"

"How did you fix it?"

"The Skipper is an old pal of mine. I also gave him a worth while sum of money."

"Thanks a million."

"Forget it. I guess I couldn't stand by and see a friend, and that too the best boxer I've known, be strung up like a blasted criminal!"

"Are you sure it's all O. K.?"

"Don't worry. You are hired on this tub as a stoker. The first shore leave you get, you desert and from then on you hunt for yourself. See?"

"Where is the Skipper?"

"He's in his cabin. Come along, I'll take you to him...."

In the grey of the morning, the battered tub left the port of Callapore, and steamed away towards the west. In the stokehold stripped to the waist, Bob Merino the heavy weight champ of the east fed the blazing fires with shovel after shovel of coal. Even among the other stokers who were a brawny team of fellows, his physique stood out as a class by itself. He swung the shovel with unaccustomed vigour as he tried to make his mind a blank against the painful memories that rose within him, but in vain. Even in the leaping orange and red flames he saw the image of Helen's face—her thick red gold tresses and violet eyes....His fellows found him morose, quiet and very reserved. They also found him highly educated and deadly with his fists. He was not good company for them....They left him severely alone. It was exactly what Bob wanted!

XV

GLORY ROAD!

The brooding quiet of the blazing desert was shattered by wild cries and the rattle of musketry. Grouped within a derelict desert tomb, a bunch of gaily attired legionnaires made their last stand against a horde of yelling, white robed followers of Allah! Wave after wave of screaming fanaticism charged the crumbling fortification, only to be beaten off by the deadly fire of these forgotten men.

But such an unequal struggle could not continue. The little knot of defenders had to face the fierce noon day heat and were without a drop of water. Already they had lost more than three quarters of their numbers and the survivors only totalled seven. A well aimed shot by one of the attackers reduced them to six.

Lying behind the battered bullet chipped rocks, with his tongue as dry as leather, and his lips cracked and swollen, Bob Merino *alias* Legionnaire Jack Brown, pumped shot after shot into that mob as they mustered for another charge.

His companion—a case hardened British N. C. O. who had deserted from his regiment to escape a court martial, and who had joined the Legion to escape capture, gave him a blood shot glance, and laughed with a hoarse unnatural rasp. "Let them come. God! Let them come....Send us these bloody niggers in white frocks by the thousands... Yes, by the thousands. We'll die like wild cats, fighting killing....Tearing at their unwashed black throats. Come you filthy bloody sons of bitches.... Come!"

Bob knew that the fellow was crazy, and going crazier with each attack.....When the next charge came, the man fired every bullet he had, with a vicious abandon, and then leaping over the barricade he charged the oncoming mob with his rifle at the ready; his bayonet a brilliant line of light in the burning sun. Somehow the sight thrilled Bob in spite of its futility. One man charging a mob of screaming hate inflamed fanaticism! He rested his cheek on the small of his rifle butt and watched with fascination. Bullets screamed and churned up little clouds of dust all around the Britisher. Still he charged on: symbolic of the coolest and deadliest bayonet fighter in the world—the British Infantryman. By a miracle he was untouched. A mounted warrior charged down on him. He stumbled and accidentally evaded a well aimed thrust from the fellow's spear. He lunged upwards with his bayonet, and the mounted man toppled over: He continued to stab the squirming figure again and again even after it lay quite still, with a persistent savagery that showed his brain had completely snapped. Others were charging down on him. If they took him alive or slightly wounded, Bob knew what his fate would be—a series of the most unspeakably atrocious mutilations on his living body, of which disembowelment would be the least. He could save him from that. The Britisher was less than a hundred yards away. Carefully, Bob focussed his sights on the fellow's head. Better this way.....He pressed the trigger without any emotion other than the satisfaction that this was the quickest and easiest way. He saw the crazed man slump to the ground as though his legs had suddenly lost their

strength. The sun grew more fierce in its burning intensity and the hot air rose like dancing vapour. Bob knew this was the end. It were better so. A natural fighter, he preferred to go down fighting. Fighting for every precious second of his earthly existence. He glanced around and hastily snatched up a dead legionaire's ammunition. There was a shot lull in the fighting and then the staccato reports of rifles mingled with the wild yells of the attackers told him the final charge was coming.

He felt a sharp scorching pain in his side. A stray shot had got him. He coughed out blood. It tasted the same as Helen's had: only it was mingled with his sweat which trickled down his face and on to his lips: also there was the burnt smell of cordite and the smell of dust, instead of the fragrance that had associated itself with Helen's blood. Strange that he should be thinking this way when he ought rather to be gasping in agony !

Then he felt terrible. He wanted to be sick. He rested his head on the burning rock and tried to retch....Only a dry half-strangled sob came. He was going to die. He wiped the blood off his lips with the back of his tunic sleeve. He knew he was going to die soon. What a strange thing—he felt no fear at all ! Why not die quietly. Why die fighting ? Bloody stupid thing to try and kill some one else before being snuffed out. He lay back and swallowed the blood that had gathered in his mouth. He suddenly felt better, or was he imagining ? He heard the battle cry of the fanatics. He thought of the Britisher. Why not die killing these fellows ? After all they had given him his death

wound.....He must fight back.....He must die fighting, or trying to. This was his last round on earth, and he and his fellow were beaten: but by what numbers! More than a score to one, and heat and thirst against them as well. A good fight.... a damned good one he decided. The thought that this was the end for him anyway, sent a fierce energy thrilling through his iron hard body. He suddenly felt light in the head. He fought off the sensation and jammed the rifle butt hard into his shoulder. He looked down the sights with a fierce mad joy in his eyes. He remembered the Britisher's crazy words and caught himself repeating them.

"Let them come: God! Let them come in thousands!" he croaked in an unnatural rasping voice that sounded like nutmeg being grated. He fired shot after shot into the charging horde. A great feeling of weakness swept him. He tried to grip the rifle but his fingers were weak as a child's. His brows felt suddenly icy cold. He slumped face downwards on the scorching sand. Something told him it was now the end. "Looks like Glory Road at last!" he said to himself, a hard grin creasing his blood crusted features. He made a supreme effort to rise on his elbows and fight back. He could feel the mighty thews of his arms tense strongly in obedience to his call. He almost succeeded. He got the butt into his shoulder once more, and with a supreme effort of concentration he sighted his weapon on a white robed figure almost in front of the fortification. He pressed the trigger and heard the roar; he saw the fanatic scream and topple. Something within him snapped with an almost electric intensity. He sprang up-

right to find he was gazing at his own body lying still in death: clad in a blood soaked uniform

So this was death!.....He moved away from the fortification. He saw the white robed fanatics overrun the place and kill his comrades. Very strange that they could not see him!

He stood there with his feet firmly planted on the sands and towered over them. He laughed. His laughter mingled with the howling desert wind. They could not hear him....He could not feel the desert heat.....The glare did not hurt his eyes.... He did not feel sick or thirsty. He stretched out his great arms and laughed again.

He heard a soft voice full of melody, call to him. He turned: it was Helen. She was a thousand times more beautiful. Her red gold tresses which seemed more brilliant than the sun, fell down to her heels. Her face was gloriously happy. "I waited so long Bob! I knew you would come!" she smiled and held out her marble like hands. He sprang forward. His body was surging with an amazing new energy that he had never before known. He caught her in his arms.

He laughed aloud in sheer triumph....Far away he could see the little citron garden. Holding her in his arms, he swooped down towards it: swifter than a falling star in the night skies! Then Helen slipped out of his arms.

"There is Mother Margaret, she is talking to Sister Henrietta. I must go and kiss them!"

Bob saw Helen kiss the white robed nuns, but they did not seem to feel it. Bob merely heard Mother Margaret remark to the other, "What a heavenly fragrance seems to linger in the garden

this evening!" Helen caught his hand, and they sprang into the air.

"Come Bob, we must not tarry here!"

"Where shall we go, Helen?" he asked.

"Can't you see Darling?" she asked, holding him in her arms, and then pointing to a dazzling radiance far away, she said, "there. We are going to a land of Golden Glory, and Perfect Bliss. A land where everything is Perfection!"

Bob looked, and smiled. He caught her to his heart, and together they fled towards the dazzling radiance....